Dialectic, Desire & Discipline:
The Formation of the Philosopher on the Scene of the Platonic Dialogue

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Abstract

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The following argument explores the relationship between epistemology and ethics in the Platonic dialogues. Focusing on the drama that takes place on the scene of the dialogues, I trace Socrates’ struggle to impose rules on the conversation. What I show is that though Socrates’ question invites a response from his interlocutor (and so, is commonly celebrated as open-ended), the questions he asks and the rules he imposes, restricts contribution that his interlocutor can make to the dialogue. I argue that this discursive practice, the dialectic, not only imports a specific epistemology—a specific image of knowledge—but this episteme is used to interpret what Socrates’ interlocutor values and desires; so the discourse brings with it a certain understanding of the form that desire should take. The epistemological assumptions, then, also assume (and endeavor to produce) a particular type of subject. A careful examination of the discursive practice by which Plato distinguishes Socrates and philosophy from other figures and practices reveals that Plato’s epistemological and ethical ends are more circumscribed than is usually acknowledged. By developing a sensitivity to the struggle that takes place over method, I argue, one not only becomes sensitive to the exclusions on which philosophy is founded (e.g., the considerations deemed irrelevant to the conversation) but one also develops a sensitivity to the power dynamic that structures the relationship between interlocutors. More broadly, this raises the problem of how certain discursive practices support particular distributions of power and different ethical possibilities while suppressing others.
For my parents, whose work is behind everything I do

&

For Mary Jo, for your love, your support, your patience, and your criticism.
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Introduction: On Socratic Cruelty & the Production of the Philosophical Subject:

Callicles:
“How violent (biaios) you are Socrates…. Couldn’t you go through the argument by yourself, either speaking by yourself or answering yourself?”

Socrates:
“Epicharmus’s saying may come to pass for me: ‘What two men were saying beforehand, I, being one,’ may become sufficient for” (Gorgias 505d-e)

The Confession of a Reluctant Plato Scholar:

What drives my interest in Plato’s work is what, for the longest time, drove me away from it. Platonic/Socratic Cruelty. Since first encountering the Platonic dialogues I have been unable to shake the feeling that Socrates, the philosophical hero par excellence, frequently behaved in very questionable ways towards his interlocutors. Though I was interested in many of the questions they raised, for a long time I avoided the Platonic dialogues because I was disturbed by the aggression of this character, Socrates, who, together with Plato, has been so long enshrined as the origin of Western philosophy. Indeed, what made this suspicion of Plato’s Socrates all the more disturbing was the sense that there was an almost universal code of silence that surrounded the issue. There is something very lonesome in suspecting Socrates in this manner; for when Socrates verbally abused his interlocutors, when he cut them off before they could explain themselves, when he made fun of them, when he shamed them, when he appeared to distort what they were saying, it seemed that no one noticed. No one objected. No one protested. No one, that is, except for the Plato’s characters themselves.

Despite the relatively scant attention that Platonic/Socratic cruelty receives amongst Plato’s readers, the dialogues themselves frequently register the discomfort and objections of Socrates’ interlocutors. Thus, in the epigraph above, we find Callicles protesting the “violence” of Socratic questioning as he resists Socrates’ pressure to persist in their discussion. Moreover, Socrates does not deny this charge, but instead admonishes Callicles for refusing to “put up with being improved and experiencing the very treatment now under discussion, the process of discipline” (Gorgias 505c). Indeed, earlier in the same dialogue, when Polus hesitates to continue answering Socrates’ questions, Socrates acknowledges the discomfort he causes. “Do not hesitate to answer Polus,” Socrates says, “for it will do you no hurt, but submit nobly to the argument as you would to a doctor, and say either yes or no to my question” (Gorgias 475d). It is worth noting in this context that the medical treatments that the dialogue mentions are rather violent—they include surgery, cautery and the use of purgatives (456b, 480c)—so whether he portrays himself as a doctor or a disciplinarian, Socrates seems to acknowledge that his practice is marked by a certain violence. Needless to say, by portraying himself as a doctor, Plato’s Socrates seeks to justify this violence in the name of his interlocutor’s psychic health.

I will discuss the Gorgias at length in chapter one, but it is important to notice that this portrayal of the dialectic as a violent, if well-intentioned, undertaking is not limited to that text. In the Meno, Socrates is famously compared to a torpedo fish, because contact with him “numbs” his interlocutor’s lips and mind, reducing him to helplessness (80a-d). In the Laches, Nicias warns Lysimachus that, should he enter into conversation with Socrates, he would undoubtedly become “entangled” in the argument and that “Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him” (187e-188a). Nicias describes this as a worthy experience, of course, but that should not blind us to the unmistakable intimations of violence/compulsion in the Socratic “trapping” that he describes. The portrayal of Socrates as setting traps is notable in that it invokes the activity of hunting, to which philosophy is frequently
compared. The philosopher is not only represented as a “mighty hunter” and “master of device and artifice” in his pursuit of abstract beauty and truth (Symp 203d), but the dialogues’ discussions of philosophical eroticism also portray him as a hunter of beautiful boys (Phdr 253c, Prot 309a), which suggests that the philosopher’s aggressive attitude is not lost in his comportment towards those around him. Indeed, in the Gorgias, Callicles not only complains about this sort of behavior (this aggression and trap setting), but Socrates seems to acknowledge that he does this sort of thing.

So, why, despite the protests that Plato preserves in the margins of his texts, is there not more attention paid to this question of Socrates’ dialectical behavior? Part of the reason, no doubt, stems from the nature of the Platonic dialogues themselves. Socrates is their unrivalled hero. In the Gorgias, he is presented as the only living Athenian to practice “the true art of politics” (521d). In the Symposium, Socrates communicates from the prophetess Diotima a new set of mysteries, which are both a new erotic practice and a new politics. Moreover, Socrates’ resemblance to Eros as conceived by Diotima, clearly indicates that he embodies this new way of living. Moreover, Socrates ultimately sacrifices himself to this new way of living, becoming its martyr and thus teaching the Athenians a new way of dying. And in the Phaedrus Socrates becomes an image of Zeus. It is no easy thing to question a character of such stature, so even as Plato preserves the concerns of Socrates’ critics, his portrayal of Socrates makes it difficult to take their protests too seriously. Indeed, Plato inoculates Socrates against such protests all the more effectively by putting them in the mouths of questionable characters.

If this is Plato’s strategy, it has largely worked. While Plato blunts the force of criticisms aimed at Socrates by incorporating such weakened protests into his dialogues, many of Plato’s readers simply obliterate them. David M. Halperin exemplifies this approach. The picture of Socratic dialogue that Halperin provides is in many respects quite traditional. “The Platonic dialogue is the true model of philosophical inquiry.” Halperin says:

(Plato) was perhaps the only one who fully understood the reciprocal erotic dynamic of a Socratic conversation and he employed the dialogue-form to illustrate its workings. For in Plato’s hands the dialogue-form itself represents an attempt to recapture the original and authentic context of philosophy—the exchange of questions and answers from which emerges, dialectically, an image of excellence: the lover’s beautiful speeches. By its very form, then, the Platonic dialogue aspires to engage the reader... in a give-and-take, a mutual exchange of ideas, an open-ended discussion. (78-79)

1 In this the philosopher closely resembles the sophist, as he is conceived of in the Sophist, as a hunter of rich, young men (221c-223b). The difference, the Sophist suggests, is the quality of their “prey.”
2 When Callicles protests Socrates’ shame tactics, he says that Socrates caught Polus and Gorgias “in the toils of (his) argument and silenced (them),” shaming them into contradictory positions (482d-e). Socrates denies the accusation, but in a manner that casts doubt upon his denial. As he asks Callicles a question that will lead him into contradiction as well, Socrates insists, “I am not trapping you with words” (490a); but he immediately interrupts Callicles’ answer, “Hold there a moment!” (490a-b), indicating that he is indeed trapping Callicles with words.

Halperin’s picture of philosophical dialogue relies, on the one hand, on his provocative reading of philosophical desire, which suggests that contrary to the Athenian convention Plato eliminates passivity from the pederastic relationship. On the other hand, it relies heavily on Plato’s Seventh Letter, which describes philosophical insight as “flash(ing) out” when, over the course of a long time, a subject is “closely examined in an atmosphere of good will and... an ungrudging exchange of questions and answers” (344b-c, qtd. in Halperin 78). It is worth pointing out, however, that Halperin does not examine Socrates’ actual dialectical behavior as it appears in the dialogues to see whether it fits his description. I will return to Halperin in chapter five below, but what is important to recognize now is that Halperin’s conclusions are also reached by many other paths. Gregory Vlastos’ studies of the Platonic dialogues, for instance, focus largely on the logical structure of the arguments that unfold during Socratic elenchus (or cross examination). However, he too describes Socratic questioning as “a cooperative endeavor for mutual enlightenment.”

On the other hand, Julia Kristeva, whose poststructuralist approach to the dialogues could not be more different from Vlastos’, also stakes out a similar position with respect to Socrates’ dialectical behavior. “Socratic dialogues are characterized by opposition to any official monologism claiming to possess a ready-made truth. Socratic truth ("meaning") is the product of a dialogical relationship among speakers; it is correlational and its relativism appears by virtue of the observers’ autonomous points of view.” These scholars (and many others) infer from the fact that the Socratic interrogation takes dialogue-form that Socrates’ approach to his interlocutors allows for a “cooperative” and “open-ended” endeavor. That is to say, they assume that Socrates is open to a meaningful dialogue, in which his interlocutor is given the opportunity to independently make the strongest case for a given position as he is able. The dialogue-form then, in itself, would seem to embody Socrates’ “relentless polemic against dogmatism” (Vlastos 1994 45). It is easy to understand how one infers open-endedness from dialogue-form. After all, Socrates does not deliver monologues (not officially, anyway). He invites his interlocutor to speak, so how could one detect dogmatism or eristic or violence in that?

It is worth sounding a note of warning here. In Socrates and the Fat Rabbis, Daniel Boyarin forcefully argues such questioning can indeed act dogmatically. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Boyarin reminds us that there is a difference between “represented dialogues” or pieces of text that are formally dialogues and those texts that are more meaningfully “dialogical.” Dialogical texts are those in which discourses that are alien to the author’s own are allowed to enter into and disrupt the author’s discourse and the vision of the

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5 Kristeva, Julia. “Word, Dialogue, Novel.” Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art.” Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. Gora, Thomas, Alice Jardin and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. 81, my emphasis. Kristeva’s position in this article focuses more on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin than on the work of Plato. It is worth noting, however, that to the extent that she describes “the observers’ autonomous points of view” (the reader’s position) as relativizing the outcome of Socratic dialogue, Kristeva seems to make the truth of the Socratic dialogue relative in spite of itself. By emphasizing the manner in which the reader, as audience of the dialogue, reopens the question under discussion, Kristeva actually finds in the transmission of the dialogue a resource—the audience—whose judgment of the issue Socrates frequently dismisses. In any case, Kristeva’s description of the “relative” status of the truth of Socratic dialogue does not conform to Socrates’ frequent pronouncements about the epistemic certainty of his conclusions. For instance, that “these facts... are buckled fast and clamped together—to put it somewhat crudely—by arguments of steel and adamant” (Gorgias 508e-509a).
world that it implies. Dialogism or dialogue in this sense is more far reaching phenomenon than the dialogue-form. Bakhtin explains:

> The essential dialogicality of (a text) is in no way exhausted by the external, compositionality expressed by dialogues carried on by characters…. This is so because dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue, laid out compositionally in a text; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech, and all relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance.  

Dialogism, then, not only takes place in the back and forth exchanges between characters, it is permeates any socially coded behavior. (For instance, when one “acts like a man,” one’s behavior is a response to inherited practices and discourses about what constitutes masculinity). As readers of literary texts, according to Bakhtin, we can discern dialogues between competing discourses throughout all of the text’s structures, not just in the represented dialogue. Indeed, Boyarin points out that formal dialogues frequently offer the most impoverished form of dialogism. “This is owing... to the fact that in represented dialogue, the dialogue is an object,” and as such, “alien languages are not allowed to enter the language of the author which remains (at least at these moments) monologically in control of the objects of representation” (15).

Of course, this discussion focuses on literary works in which one can refer to an author that is distinct from his characters. And the question that I have raised concerns whether Socrates’ questioning fosters a meaningful dialogue between characters, so I have not sought to make this move back and forth between character and author as Bakhtin and Boyarin do. Nonetheless, this idea of turning another’s discourse into an object to be investigated and held at a distance describes an important effect of Socrates’ questions; so it is legitimate to ask whether Socrates’ questions do not actually work to dampen the dialogue.

However, there remains little room in the traditional (and still dominant) picture of Socrates’ philosophical practice for Callicles’ or Protagoras’ or Polus’ objections to Socrates’ behavior. In the literature on Plato’s dialogues, with a few exceptions these characters’ complaints barely receive any hearing. The works of Halperin, Kristeva and Vlastos are typical in this regard. While the first two scholars’ celebrations of philosophical dialogue ignore any indication of domination in the Platonic texts altogether, Vlastos’ classic essay, “the Socratic Elenchus,” only fleetingly acknowledges the discomfort of Socrates’ interlocutors. Disputing another scholar’s account of how the dialectic’s conclusion is drawn, Vlastos insists that Socrates’ interlocutor does not draw the thesis that contradicts his original thesis by himself. Rather, Vlastos writes, “It is Socrates who draws it; the opponent has to be carried to it kicking and screaming” (29, my emphasis). Vlastos, of course, does not dwell on any scene in which Socrates overcomes the resistance of his interlocutor nor does he register any of the specific complaints that Socrates’ interlocutors make. More importantly, this image of Socrates overpowering his interlocutors does not bother Vlastos’ depiction of Socratic elenchus as “a cooperative endeavor for mutual enlightenment.” Why should it? Vlastos dismisses such protests out of hand by figuring them as the childish tantrums of those who, in spite of

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themselves, must be forced to face reality. Surely, Vlastos implies, one need not take such tantrums seriously.⁷

**Interrogating Socrates: What is Philosophy?**

There is one strain of contemporary Plato scholarship that tends to confront Socrates’ questionable dialectical behavior more squarely than most. This group of scholars is diverse in training and approach, but they are united in posing the question, “What, for Plato, is philosophy?” and in answering it in terms of a distinctive method, the dialectic. This is not the only answer to the question of what philosophy is that Plato’s dialogues will support. As we will see below, another approach to the dialogues answers the question in terms of the philosopher’s intention and character. Instead of asking “what is philosophy,” the second group of scholars asks, “Who is the philosopher?” It is not surprising that both approaches have been fruitful, for dialogue after dialogue poses the questions of who and what Socrates’ interlocutor is/does, and these questions are consistently attended by the more or less explicit questions of who Socrates is and what he does.⁸ In what follows, I will argue that method (the dialectic) is central to Plato’s understanding of philosophy. However, the “intentional” approach offers a valuable supplement to the “methodological” approach. This is particularly true to the extent that methodological readings sometimes focus too narrowly on logical concerns and lose sight of the larger context in which the dialectic is conducted. That said, methodological readings of Plato are of particular interest, because to the extent that they ask how the dialectic is conducted, they prompt one to consider how Socrates treats his interlocutors. The task of characterizing the dialectic puts one in a better position to seriously consider the protests of Socrates’ interlocutors: Do the Platonic dialogues bear witness to a certain violence or coercion in the performances of the dialectic?

**Methodological Readings.** A classic statement of the case for distinguishing Plato’s philosophy by method is articulated by G.B. Kerferd. While recognizing that a precise definition of the philosopher’s method remains elusive, Kerferd insists on the centrality of the dialectic to Plato’s understanding of philosophy. “It has been well said that the word ‘dialectic’ had a strong tendency in Plato to mean ‘the ideal method, whatever that may be,’” he writes, “But it regularly involves an approach to the Platonic Forms and this more than anything else distinguishes it

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⁷ When he waives away the protests of Socrates’ interlocutors, Vlastos reproduces Plato’s gesture of disparaging Socrates’ interlocutors rather than addressing their concerns. This is reminiscent of the Gorgias’ “jury of children,” in front of whom Socrates imagines his trial:

> My trial will be like that of a doctor prosecuted by a cook before a jury of children…. If the plaintiff should accuse him in these terms: Children of the jury, this fellow has done all of you abundant harm… ruining you by surgery and cautery, and he bewilders you by starving and choking you, giving you bitter draughts and compelling you to hunger and thirst, whereas I used to feast you with plenty of sweetmeats of every kind.

> What do you think a doctor could find to say in such a desperate situation? If he spoke the truth and said, “All this I did, children, in the interests of health,” what a shout do you think such a jury would utter? (Gorg 521e-522a)

Who wants to side with the children (the Athenians) who condemned Socrates to death or the cook (the orators) who prosecuted him? Obviously, I do not defend Socrates’ death sentence, but one can question how he treats his interlocutor without being reduced to that position.

⁸ Just to give a sense of how widespread this concern is in the dialogues: The question, of who Gorgias is frames the beginning of the discussion in the dialogue named for him (447c); the same question is put to Protagoras after Hippocrates proves unable to answer the question about who/what Protagoras is (Prot 316c, 311b-312a); a version of this question also opens the Phaedrus (227a); and when the Sophist poses this question about the sophist, of course, the philosopher is very clearly implicated in the investigation (230b-c).
from antilogic."\(^9\) Opposing dialectic to the Sophistic practice of developing *antilogies* or competing arguments about a given phenomenon (neither of which is treated as the final word), Kerferd argues that for Plato the dialectic is distinguished by its epistemological horizon.\(^10\) That is to say, while sophistic *antilogies* highlight the contradictory and changing meaning of sensual phenomena, the dialectic “look(s) elsewhere for the truth… to more permanent, secure and reliable entities, the famous Platonic Forms” (Kerferd 67). Because its object, the form/Being, is outside of that ever-changing world of becoming, dialectic is thought to reach—or, at least, reach for—a more stable form of knowledge. Kerferd is skeptical about the manner in which Plato distinguishes the philosopher’s method from that of the sophists. In particular, he argues that “when… Plato suggests, as he does repeatedly, that the sophists were not concerned with the truth, we may begin to suppose that this was because they were not concerned with what *he* regarded as the truth, rather than because they were not concerned with the truth as *they* saw it” (Kerferd 67). Thus, he suggests, Plato’s dialogues transform a serious, epistemological disagreement into an occasion to attack Socrates’ interlocutors for their “moral failings.” In his critique of the dialectic, Kerferd echoes the position of Richard Robinson, who details the epistemological assumptions that are imported with Socrates’ “What is *x*”-question (58-60), criticizes Plato’s failure to seriously justify his methodological imposition (82), and describes Socrates’ question-asking as constraining the speech of his interlocutor (7-9). This position has recently been echoed Daniel Boyarin, who argues that Socrates consistently and dogmatically foists the dialectic upon interlocutors in order to assert control over the conversation.\(^11\)

Such critiques of Plato’s method, however, are relatively rare. It is far more common for Plato scholars to share Kerferd, Robinson and Boyarin’s basic contention that the dialectic is portrayed as the philosophical method without sharing their reservations about the manner in which it is conducted. There is a distinct tendency towards adulation that animates a lot of Plato scholarship, and this frequently involves an almost ritual abuse of Socrates’ interlocutors.\(^12\) Such

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\(^10\) “At any one time the same man, for example, is both short and tall, depending on whom he is compared with” (Kerferd 66). Thus, according to Kerfed, antilogic reflects the conflicting and relative character of the phenomenal world, which Plato takes as indicating the need for a more stable epistemological ground.

\(^11\) Boyarin 2007 139.

\(^12\) We have already seen this in Vlastos’ portrayal of Socrates’ resistant interlocutors as children. It can also be seen in the frequent condemnation of the dialectical ineptitude of Socrates’ interlocutors. Henry Sidgwick, for instance, distinguishes between two types of sophists against whom Socrates is measured. On the one hand, there is Gorgias and Protagoras and others like them, “(who) affect subtle verbal distinctions; but upon this, as on other subjects, they can only talk at length; they are not prepared to define their abstract terms… and are perfect tios in the art of argumentation” (333). On the other hand, there are those whose manner of discourse, like Euthydemos and Dionysodorus, “ape” the Socratic *elenchus*. “A shifty disputer” Sidgwick says, “has taken the place of the windy declamer… instead of pretentious and hollow rhetoric we have perverse and fallacious dialectic” (334). Sidgwick, Henry. “The Sophists.” *Lectures on the Philosophy of Kant & Other Philosophical Lectures & Essays*. London: MacMillan & Co, 1905. 323-372. See also Walter Hamilton’s “Introduction” to his translation of the *Gorgias*, where he writes, “the impetuous self-confidence with which at the beginning of the dialogue (Polus) tries to take its whole burden on himself is matched only by his incompetence at the Socratic method of argument” (9). Hamilton, Walter. *Introduction*. *Gorgias*. Plato. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1960. 7-18. Such ad *hominem* attacks, of course, are not the invention of these commentators but they rarely pause to consider the value/effect of reiterating them. This abuse is a way of bypassing the epistemological questions about how to characterize truth and whether Socrates is justified in imposing the constraints of a method that is based on his image of a timeless, universal Truth. At the same time, this ritualized abuse is part of a practice of establishing and affirming the value of philosophy and dialectic by a rejection of its other (the Sophists and rhetoric) (Boyarin 2007 38).
reverence can be seen in innumerable introductions to works of Plato scholarship, which, like Herman L. Sinaiko’s *Love, Knowledge & Discourse in Plato*, describe Plato’s dialogues as “the fountainhead of the Western philosophical tradition…. (t)he conversations… embody(ing) the very essence of philosophy” (1). Despite the occasional dissenting voice, such celebratory treatments show few signs of abating. The recent dissertation of Tushar Irani attests to this: “Plato should be regarded as the first thinker in history to self-consciously reflect on and promote the place of reason in… inquiry and argument. He even coined a term for the practice, which he called ‘dialectic.’” The implication of Irani’s and Sinaiko’s statements, of course, is that reason is really only practiced in one way (as Plato describes); and if others claim to be acting rationally but do not conform to Plato’s demands, then they fall short of their claim. Francisco Gonzalez echoes this position when he argues that the dialectic, with its methodological demands (not only its insistence on a particular conception of truth but also its demand for brevity) represents the only possibility for “genuine conversation” and community.

Certainly, not everyone who understands philosophy as being defined by a specific method is quite as enthusiastic as Sinaiko, Irani or Gonzalez, but many do share this (Platonic) assumption, that Reason was, is, and will always be the same (and that Plato pretty much had it right). Thus, scholars from Henry Sidgwick and George Grote to W. K. C. Guthrie, Gregory Vlastos and T.H. Irwin have sought to identify the formal and procedural characteristics of the dialectic that set it apart from other, non-philosophical modes of speech. Like Robinson, Irwin and Vlastos, have sought to identify the rules that govern the dialectic and they describe it primarily in logical terms. Thus, they tend to focus on the manner in which Socrates gains his interlocutors’ assent, first to a major premise (usually the definition of a virtue, like justice or temperance); then elicits their support for other minor premises, which are eventually shown to contradict the major premise. As a result of their emphasis on logic, these authors raise questions about the validity of certain arguments or about the extent to which Socrates is justified in either claiming positive conclusions or generalizing the outcome of his investigations. Unlike Robinson, however, Vlastos, Irwin (along with Gonzalez and Irani) fail to question how the rules that the dialectic imposes constrain the possible outcomes of the discussion. Indeed, these authors tend to take for granted that because the dialectic is presented as a “discussion” that what is dramatized is a genuinely open-ended and cooperative endeavor.

*Intentional Readings.* The other major approach to the Platonic dialogues, which seeks to characterize Plato’s conception of philosophy, focuses on the philosopher rather than his method:

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15 This assumption, of course, has been assailed from many different philosophical quarters over the last century and a half, from Nietzsche and Foucault, the Frankfurt school writers, Heidegger and Derrida, American pragmatists, Thomas Kuhn, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to name just a few of the prominent critics of the traditional gesture of dehistoricizing truth procedures.


17 Given the focus of Vlastos’ approach, the closest he comes to seriously questioning Socrates’ behavior is when he asks, “Does Socrates Cheat?” However, this question already assumes the rules of the dialectic and simply asks about the logical rigor of Socrates’ arguments within that framework. Vlastos, Gregory. “Does Socrates Cheat?” *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991, 157-178.
“Who is the philosopher? Who is Socrates, and what sets him apart,” this approach asks. Alexander Nehamas’ “Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato’s Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry” is critical of most attempts to define philosophy in terms of method. Nehamas traces current debates about method back to the work of Sidgwick and Grote at the end of the Nineteenth Century, but he takes issue with Sidgwick’s treatment of “the method of question-and-answer” as “the exclusive province of Socrates” while pointing out that, for Grote, the question of method was second to the “moral interest” or “overall purpose” of the philosopher (110-111). Nehamas’ aim is complicated by his interest in distinguishing between Plato and the historical Socrates (which is not a question I take up), but one can safely say that he wants to dislodge the question of method from its place of prominence.

One of the more sophisticated, recent approaches to these questions is offered by Marina McCoy’s Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists. McCoy deliberately sets out to counter the tendency to “emphasize the distinctiveness of Socratic or Platonic philosophy in terms of a technical method separable from rhetoric.” Contrary to the positions articulated by Kerferd, Vlastos and company, McCoy argues, it is not the method but the “character and moral intention” that distinguishes the philosopher (1). More specifically, McCoy argues, what sets the philosopher apart is his love of the forms, which creates for him a set of “theoretical commitments,” placing him within a certain “vision of the world and (himself) in relation to that world” (6). The most salient feature of the philosopher’s theoretical commitment is that it opens him to an external standard that saves him from falling into solipsistic self-satisfaction (191).

A less nuanced, though perhaps more popular, attempt to distinguish the philosopher by his intention is articulated by Robert George and quoted by David Brooks’ column for the New York Times. Discussing Plato’s Gorgias, George argues,

> The explicit point of the dialogue is to demonstrate the superiority of philosopher (the quest for wisdom and truth) to rhetoric (the art of persuasion in the cause of victory). At a deeper level, it teaches that the worldly honors that one may win by being a good speaker can all too easily erode one’s devotion to the truth – a devotion that is critical to our integrity as persons. So rhetorical skills are dangerous, potentially soul-imperiling gifts.

It is with good reason that scholars like McCoy and George seek to distinguish the philosopher by his moral intention, for, in the name of truth, Plato’s dialogues frequently heap abuse upon Socrates’ interlocutors, representing them as unprincipled, opportunistic scoundrels. That said, I share Kerferd and Boyarin’s suspicion that the ad hominem attacks on Socrates’ interlocutors tend to mask real epistemological differences, and I fear that the reiteration of these attacks in current scholarship tends to leave such differences unexamined. This is not equally true for all who would distinguish the philosopher by his moral intention. For instance, whereas George appears to import Plato’s recriminations against rhetoric wholesale, McCoy, like Kerferd, at least recognizes that the sophists appear to operate with different set of epistemological assumptions. As a result, she does not attribute to them the bad faith that George does. Still, like George, McCoy attributes to the philosopher a superior moral intention—a dedication to an external, transcendent truth—which is marked by salutary psychic effects. In particular, McCoy argues that the philosopher’s orientation toward the forms requires that he remain open to the possibility

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of transforming his opinions and himself in light of them. “There is always for the philosopher the possibility that not only his own opinions but also his soul, out of which these opinions arise, are in need of transformation. The sophist,” on the other hand, McCoy argues, “wishes to exert control over the world of politics but is not himself open to being changed by the forms or by other people with whom he is in conversation” (132-133). According to McCoy, because the sophist lacks the philosopher’s dedication to an ahistorical, universal conception of truth, there is nothing that could open him to criticism or transformation.

I have serious reservations about McCoy’s insistence on the need for a transcendent, ahistorical truth as the condition for dialogue and transformation. Indeed, I will join Boyarin in arguing that the Platonic conception of truth, which underwrites the dialectic, 21 hampers any effort at meaningful dialogue rather than fostering it. Nevertheless, McCoy does well not only to remind us that the stakes of the dialogues are ethical, but also to insist that by setting the philosopher in relation to a certain image of the “truth” Plato’s understanding of philosophy shapes the philosophical subject’s possibilities. In the final chapters of this dissertation, I seek to push McCoy’s insights further by characterizing how this fundamental orientation toward (Platonic) truth shapes the rest of the subject’s experience of his or her desire, senses, body, community, and loved ones. In short, the question that I want to raise is borrowed from McCoy’s description of how the philosopher is situated in relation to himself and his world. Ultimately, I argue that Plato’s philosophy is intended to produce a very particular type of subject, who inhabits these relations in a particular way; and that if we seek an honest account of Plato’s conception of philosophy, we need to attend to the constraints that are implied in his epistemology for these also entail ethical constraints. 22

The difference between the “intentional” and the “methodological” characterizations of philosophy described above, of course, is more a matter of emphasis than it is an absolute distinction. Though McCoy explicitly sets her argument for the importance of the philosopher’s intention against the readings of Kerferd, Vlastos and company, there are important respects in which their readings coincide. McCoy and George are not alone in underscoring the philosopher’s essential devotion to the truth. This orientation, which McCoy treats as a character trait, is integrated into Kerferd’s and Vlastos’ understandings of the dialectic. Distinguishing the Socratic method or elenchus from eristic, Vlastos writes, “elenchus remains in principle a method of searching for truth, which eristic is not, but only a method (or set of methods—a whole bag of tricks) for winning arguments.” 23 Likewise, as we have already seen, Kerferd describes the approach to the Platonic Forms (i.e., a particular understanding of “truth”) as what “more than anything else distinguishes (the dialectic)” (65). The philosopher’s relation to truth, then, remains central to the account of those who would characterize Plato’s philosophy as being defined by the dialectic. What distinguishes the methodological characterization from the

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21 Alexander Nehamas makes this point, arguing that the theory of the forms is Plato’s invention, and that it acts as an attempt to explain Socrates’ practice of elenchus while also distinguishing between it and the practice of the sophists (Nehamas 1999 117).

22 In this respect, one might describe my project as broadly Foucaultian, because seeks to describe many of the relations that Michel Foucault describes as central to the classical Athenian problematization of pederasty. Foucault, Michel. History of Sexuality, v. 2: The Use of Pleasure. Trans. Hurley, Robert. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

23 Vlastos, Gregory. “The Socratic Elenchus,” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy. 1(1983): 27-58. (31 n. 14). I should note that Vlastos is referring to the elenchus, the practice of cross-examination, which he describes as specifically Socratic (as opposed to Platonic). This is a distinction which neither Kerferd nor McCoy make in their discussions of dialectic. Because I will not be attempting to distinguish between the historical Socrates and Plato’s Socrates, this distinction is out of the scope of the present work.
intentional one, then, is that the philosopher’s intention is fit into a more robust set of claims about the activity that, for Plato, constitutes philosophy.

One can understand McCoy’s reluctance to incorporate a specific method into her understanding of Plato’s philosophy. As she rightly points out, Socrates employs a wide variety of rhetorical techniques: “eikos (probability argument), ethopoiia (character portrayal), antithesis, cross-examination... parallelism.... myths, poetic interpretations, images and other devices” (4).24 so one cannot easily attribute to him one, single mode of speech. Indeed, this difficulty seems to be what Kerferd and Robinson acknowledge when they recognize the slipperiness of the term, “dialectic.”25 This also appears to be the basis of Nehamas’ objection against methodological readings of Plato. Nonetheless, it is also difficult to ignore the consistency with which Socrates either rejects the speech practices that he associates with rhetoric and the sophists in order to insist upon the dialectic (Gorgias, Protagoras, Symposium, Menexenus) or makes a marked effort to subordinate such practices to the philosophical practice of dialectic (Phaedrus). McCoy acknowledges that in the Gorgias, “Socrates seems to point toward the possibility of such a method,” but she insists that things get “murkier” elsewhere (2).

She points to the Phaedrus, in particular, as showing that “philosophy and rhetoric are compatible” (McCoy 2). However, McCoy insinuates that the methodological approach to the dialogues must rely much more on the Gorgias than it really does.

Not only do the formal features of different modes of speech play a role in Socrates’ rejection of different speech practices in other dialogues, but those features are frequently connected to the same criticisms of their negative psychic effects that one sees in the Gorgias. The Protagoras, for instance, finds Socrates criticizing Protagoras’ “speech-making” because, he says, the length at which he speaks induces a sort of “forgetfulness” that makes it impossible to follow the answer (Prot 334c-d). The length of a speech, then, is not only criticized for being evasive, as it is in the Gorgias (448d-449a), but Socrates also repeatedly warns about the ability of speeches to induce a sort of “self-forgetting.” In the same dialogue, after Protagoras levels a particularly compelling criticism of a Simonides’ poem that Socrates praises—a criticism whose affective force is, notably, strengthened the applause of their audience (which is a part of the rhetorical speech situation that Socrates overtly rejects)—Socrates narrates the effect of Protagoras’ speech. “At his words and the applause things went dark and I felt giddy,” Socrates says, “like a man who has been hit by a good boxer” (339e). Portraying Protagoras’ speech as not only dazzling, but as violent and disorienting in its effect, Socrates suggests that he had to question Prodicus in order to buy time to collect himself and think of a rejoinder. This disorientation, which is elsewhere described as the experience of “being carried away” or of “forgetting oneself,” is frequently attached to non-philosophical genres of speech—rhetoric, poetry, and so forth—and the experience remains an enduring concern of Plato’s dialogues.


25 Indeed, Robinson notes that as Plato spends more time explicitly reflecting on issues of method in the middle dialogues, clear cut examples of method become less frequent. “Actual cases of the elenchus follow one another in quick succession in the early works; but when we looked for discussions of the elenchus, we found them few and not very abstract. The middle dialogues, on the other hand, about in abstract words and proposals concerning method, but it is by no means obvious whether these proposals are being actually followed” (62)
This concern over the possibility of being subjected to another’s discourse, and of the violence inherent in this experience, occupies many of the Platonic dialogues. They frequently attest to this effect of rhetorical speech: in the Menexenus, Socrates describes orators as “steal(ing) away our souls with their embellished words…. (so it is not) until the fourth or fifth day (that) I come to my senses and know where I am” (235a-c); in the Cratylus, Socrates describes Euthyphro’s “enchanting ravishment” as “not only fill(ing) my ears but tak(ing) possession of my soul” (396e); in the Gorgias, Socrates compares the “undisciplined soul” to a “leaky jar,” which is too open and too easily blown to and fro by what is external to it, whether desirable objects or the speech of others (492a-494a); and in the Phaedrus, Socrates describes the speech of the poets as inhabiting him in such a way that the words’ alien intentions set him in the wrong sort of relation to his beloved, the gods, other men and himself (235c). In the last three dialogues Socrates attests to his need for another discourse to purify himself and to shore up the boundaries of his soul against such intrusions (Phdr 243a, Crat 396e, Gorg 494a, 505c).

Moreover, the dialectic consistently answers this need. Sometimes, the practice of dialectic is directly presented as what preserves the integrity of the soul against a world of forces that threaten overrun it. This is the case, for instance, when Socrates insists that by refusing to submit to his questions, Callicles refuses to submit to discipline (Gorg 505c). Sometimes, the dialectic is presented as what answers this need less directly. So, in the Phaedrus, when Socrates formulates his need for a “purifying discourse” to drive out his previous speech and prevent his vision from being compromised, the palinode that he delivers cannot be classed as an instance of the dialectic. Nevertheless, the palinode theorizes the conditions upon which the dialectic depends, while presenting that practice as what purifies the soul by reorienting it to its proper object (the forms). The palinode offers a prime example of what McCoy refers to as the “compatibility” of rhetoric and philosophy, but this “compatibility” consists of the wholesale subordination of rhetorical mode of speech to the dialectic. While it cannot be doubted that Plato’s philosopher incorporates other modes of speech into his practice, I will argue in what follows that the dialectic nevertheless remains to core of his practice.

Though I cannot agree with McCoy that one can so easily dispose of the methodological issue, I appreciate her emphasis on the irreducibly ethical character of the philosophical enterprise as Plato describes it. Indeed, I find the manner in which she frames discussion of philosophical practice as a question of “orientation” (or of situating of the philosopher in his relation to the world and himself) insightful, and I want to build on it. Beyond my interest in method, two further concerns set my work apart from McCoy’s. On the one hand, I am more skeptical than her regarding the psychic benefits that Plato claims for the practice; on the other hand, I think that more can be said about how the philosophical subject is situated and how that shapes his possibilities. In what follows, I will try to provide a fuller and more critical account of the type of subject that is implied in the philosopher’s “vision of the world and of himself” (as McCoy puts it) while making sense of Socrates’ methodological demands in terms of this ethical vision. Thus, I will provide a needed supplement to the methodological discussions of Plato’s works. For while much good work has been done to characterize the dialectic in terms of its rules, the scope of its conclusions and even the way in which it structures the encounter between its participants, most of these discussions do not attempt to characterize the sort of subject that is produced by this practice.

The chapters are arranged as follows:
Chapter 1: “Bound & Gagged,” On the Nature of the Dialectic. Chapter one begins with my intervention into the methodological debates over how to characterize the dialectic. Though the chapter focuses on the performance of the dialectic in the Gorgias I actually begin by considering what Francisco Gonzalez calls “the central crisis” of the Protagoras. At the physical center of the Protagoras in what is frequently called a “methodological digression” a dispute over how to conduct the conversation—over what the rules ought to govern Socrates and Protagoras’ discussion—threatens to end the conversation altogether. Gonzalez pins the responsibility for this crisis squarely on Protagoras, arguing that his relativism renders him incapable of conversation and community. Ultimately, on Gonzalez’s reading, Protagoras’ attempt to question Socrates’ methodological imposition (the dialectic) is an indication of his injustice. I offer an alternative reading of this crisis. Protagoras, I argue, raises a legitimate concern about the constraints that Socrates attempts to impose upon his speech. This concern is tied to a different epistemology, as Gonzalez hints, but his concern is that the dialectic’s demand for brevity does not allow Socrates’ partner the time and space needed to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon under consideration (334b). Socrates dismisses Protagoras’ attempt to provide a nuanced answer to his question as “speech-making” and evasion, and he insists that the demand for brevity is based upon his own faulty memory. However, I demonstrate that Socrates’ narration of the event shows that his reaction to Protagoras’ protest is itself dishonest and evasive. When Socrates imposes his methodological demands on his interlocutor, he refuses to submit this demand to the same sort of scrutiny that he demands of his interlocutor, and this gives rise to the crisis that we see at the center of the Protagoras.

This moment in the Protagoras helps to focus my analysis of the Gorgias, because while the former comes to a head in one major crisis the latter consists of series of crises. As a result, we see the same strife and the same issues get replayed in the Gorgias. I argue that the crises of the Gorgias, in which the conversation nearly collapses, are precipitated by Socrates’ methodological impositions. What the crises show is that Socrates does not feel compelled to submit his rules or the epistemological assumptions they are based upon to the sort of scrutiny that he demands of his interlocutors. What my analysis shows, then, is that the issue of power can be analyzed according two discernible moments. First, within the practice of the dialectic, it becomes clear that the rules of this practice are formulated to produce an asymmetry between speakers, thoroughly subordinated the answerer’s voice to his interrogator’s question. The dialectic allows Socrates to dominate his interlocutors. In taking this position, I lend further support to the positions articulated by Robinson and Boyarin contra the traditional depiction of the dialectic as a cooperative, open-ended endeavor. Socrates himself frequently recognizes this asymmetry, as when he figures himself as a doctor or a disciplinarian, and he seems to have his reasons for embracing this power dynamic. However, insofar as he never submits his method to the sort of scrutiny that it demands of others, Socrates never justifies to his interlocutor this asymmetry beyond invoking his good intentions. This leads us to recognize the second moment in which the question of power can be asked. The founding moment of the dialectic, in which Socrates sets up the basic framework for the “dialogue,” needs to understood as thoroughly power-laden and monological, because Socrates refuses the sort of obligations that he puts his interlocutors under. It is important to recognize this founding asymmetry as distinct from that produced over the course of the dialectical performance, because it sets a fundamental restriction on the possible reciprocity of the two participants’ obligations. That is to say, whereas the speakers could potentially switch roles (the answerer becoming the questioner and vice versa), Socrates alone exercises the power of determining the rules of the game.
The *Gorgias* shows that Socrates is quite aware of this asymmetry. Indeed, he feels justified in maintaining a hierarchical relationship with his interlocutor, because he understands it as part of his art of caring for his interlocutor’s soul. Socrates’ interrogation of his interlocutors gestures in the direction of his conception of philosophy as an art of caring for the soul, but his questions prevent his art and its methods (dialectic) from receiving the level of scrutiny that he directs towards rhetoric.

This helps us to see why the methodological discussions are so important. The Platonic dialogues implicate the method in the production of a certain type of subject. Socrates attests to the character-forming aim of his own philosophical practice when he insists that the test of anyone who would claim to practice politics is whether or not he has improved any of his fellow citizens (515c). Socrates applies this test to the great Athenian statesmen, and finds them lacking. On the other hand, Socrates claims to be the only living Athenian to practice “the true art of politics” (521d), and just as he associates with rhetoric and the “great statesmen” a particular mode of speech (long speeches/makralogia) Socrates identifies his own practice by its distinct mode of speech (the dialectic). One is justified in concluding, then, that this technique, the dialectic, is put to work in the betterment of Socrates’ interlocutors. Indeed, this is what Socrates suggests when he describes his questions as discipline or describes himself as a doctor.

This characterization of the dialectic raises a number of questions that will guide the rest of my dissertation. As my guiding question, I ask, what sort of subject is produced through this practice? Going beyond the general claims about the subject’s obligation to submit his beliefs to examination or the value of such scrutiny, I ask how Socrates’ interlocutor is shaped by this process? What does he become? Borrowing from the language of the *Gorgias*, I will ask, what is the end of Platonic/Socratic “discipline”? What and who does the dialectic seek to produce?

The question of what Socrates seeks to produce comes to the fore in the final two chapters of what follows. First, however, it is necessary to ask a more fundamental question: If the dialectic is valued for its power to shape—to improve, to discipline—Socrates’ interlocutor, from what does it derive this power? What are the conditions that enable the dialectic to transform Socrates’ interlocutor? Chapters two, three and four address this question, by describing how Socrates problematizes the relation between speech (or *logoi*), desire and the soul more generally. In particular, these chapters examine two images of the soul, as a receptacle and a chariot, and asks how these images are used to figure the subject’s relation to what is outside of it—i.e., to discourse, images, and other phenomena that affect it.

*Chapter Two: The Threatening Intimacy of Speech.* This chapter sets the stage for understanding the transformative power of dialectic by examining how Plato conceives of the relation between speech and the soul more generally. It argues that Plato’s dialogues express a powerful anxiety over the soul’s distressingly intimate relation with “the word of another” or “alien discourse.” I borrow this Bakhtinian formulation from Daniel Boyarin and Andrea Wilson Nightingale. Nightingale describes it in the following manner, “Alien discourse is presented to an individual on another person’s authority; it is an external voice that seeks to be made internal” (1995 138). As Nightingale makes clear, the question of one’s relation to the speech of another is matter of the subject’s boundaries. It concerns the distinction between inside and outside, between the will of the subject and the will of something that acts upon it.

Largely agreeing with Nightingale, I argue that the Platonic dialogues express an anxiety about the subject’s relation to the word of another. I stress how troubling this experience is for Plato, in part, by tracking how consistently Plato links the experience of another’s speech to compulsion and violence, and in part, by examining the image of the soul as a receptacle
problematizes the event of receiving another’s *logos*. This phenomenon is disconcerting because alien discourse is portrayed as violating the subject’s boundaries. Rendering the distinction between inside and outside indeterminable, the word of another enters into the individual’s soul and presents its will as one’s own. The experience, then, undercuts the agency of the invaded, violated subject, problematizing its ability to claim responsibility for its actions.

For the terms of this problem, I argue, Plato is deeply indebted to Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*. To show this I frame my discussion of the experience of alien discourses in Plato with an analysis of Gorgias’ *Helen*. In particular, I argue that Gorgias’ exoneration of Helen on the grounds that she is no more responsible for running off to Troy if she were persuaded by Alexander than if she were seized by violence or by fate, also works to exonerate Gorgias’ rhetorical adversaries. While Gorgias initially suggests that one should blame Helen’s accusers for falsely accusing her, I argue that his argument about the power of persuasion and his treatment of them as the inheritors of a tradition that has blamed her for the calamities at Troy actually exonerates them for their false accusations. Like Helen, Gorgias implies, his adversaries’ actions were not their own. As speakers for a tradition of which they were initially only auditors, they have been persuaded by the discourses that preceded them which they now repeat. It has been suggested before that Gorgias problematizes Helen’s and his audience’s agency, their ability to act as an *aitios*, a cause. I agree, but by turning the analysis towards Gorgias’ relation to his adversaries, I hope to highlight the way in which conventional discourses that exceed the scene of address attenuate the subject’s agency.

This is precisely what we see happen in the *Phaedrus*. When Socrates delivers his encomium of the non-lover, he figures himself as the site in which conventional erotic discourses are reproduced. Specifically, Socrates likens himself to a receptacle into which the words of others have been poured. Stressing his passivity, Socrates insists that he is not responsible for the speech; he is not its cause (its *aitios*), nor its author. Rather, Socrates has been invaded alien discourses belonging to the poets (253c-d) and these discourses now well up within him, retaining their alien intentions as they do. Alien discourses, then, problematize Socrates’ agency, for they not only act upon a passive soul, but insofar as they carry into it alien intentions they press the soul into relationships with objects beyond themselves. Thus, when Socrates delivers the encomium for the non-lover, he is not only acted upon by alien discourses, but those words *orient him* toward the world—toward his desire, his beloved and so on—in a particular way.

When Socrates describes this experience, he uses an image of the soul to help make sense of the transmission of discourses. This chapter focuses on that image as it comes up in the *Phaedrus* and the *Protagoras*. In particular, I argue that Socrates makes repeated recourse to an image of the soul as a “receptacle” (*angeios*) for the words of others. As a receptacle, the soul is not only open and vulnerable to what is outside of it, but, Socrates insists, it is prone to being transformed by what it receives. Socrates stresses the plasticity of the soul/receptacle by simultaneously likening it to a body that is transformed by what it eats. The image, then, is profoundly ambivalent, for at the same time that the soul is made vulnerable to corrupting influences it is its openness that allows the possibility of positive transformations. The same condition that renders the soul vulnerable to corruption and compulsion also opens it up to Socratic discipline.

While this image has not received much attention in Plato scholarship, Socrates frequently uses it to frame his or his interlocutor’s relation to the speech of another. We see him

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use this image in the *Protagoras* (314a-b), the *Cratylus* (396e), the *Gorgias* (493a-b) and the *Phaedrus* (235c-d, 244e) to thematize the risk that the soul runs in coming into contact with the word of another. The *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* provide particularly interesting uses of the analogy, because both texts broaden its scope, so that it not only figures the relation of the soul to the word of another but also to images and desire more broadly. Thus, though it has not received much attention, the image of the soul-as-receptacle unites the *Phaedrus’* concerns with rhetoric and erotics, discourse and desire (this connection will be taken up in chapter three).

Though the Platonic dialogues pick up on the same problem as Gorgias’ *Helen*, the response they formulate is very different. In particular, Gorgias provides no solution to remedy the attenuated agency of Helen. A certain innocence can be restored to her through his speech, just as a certain innocence is restored to those who have condemned her, but there is no escaping the impingements upon the subject that his speech describes. The same, however, does not hold for Platonic treatment of the problem. A key term in Plato’s treatment of the subject’s problematic relation to the word of the other is “purification” (*catharsis*). When Socrates feels himself violated by alien discourses, he consistently calls for some act of catharsis, something to “wash the bitter taste out of my mouth” (*Phaedrus* 243d). This difference will prove important, because, whether we are talking about discourse or images or beauty, conceiving of the subject’s relation to what is outside of it in terms of purity encourages a more defensive attitude towards those relations.

It is in precisely this spirit of suspicion and guardedness that the dialectic acts, I argue, not to foster open-ended discussion, as is frequently suggested, but to guard against the too much openness and too much exposure to the other. To a certain extent, I think my conclusions coincide with Nightingale’s argument that Plato is interested in the problem of how one develops an “authentic discourse,” meaning one that does not rest on external authorities (such as convention). I agree with Nightingale that for Plato such a discourse “is not invented or created by the soul but rather found in the process of recollecting the Forms” (168). However, whereas Nightingale focuses on the outcome of this process, “authentic discourse,” I argue that one needs to inquire into how the dialectic as a process of purification works. Focusing on the method rather than the end may change how we characterize Plato’s philosophical project.

*Chapter Three: Purifying Discourses, Purifying Desires: A Platonic Erotics.* Chapters Three and Four, “A Platonic Erotics” and “The Mythic Topos: Situating the Soul in a World of Relations” seek to clarify just this question: What constitutes a purifying discourse? How does the dialectic purify the soul, and of what does this “purity” consist? Purity, for Plato, is no simple thing. As Nightingale suggests, it is not necessary for a discourse to have been invented by its speaker in order to be authentic. Though I have shifted the investigation to focus on the process rather than the end—the purifying discourse rather than the “authentic” one—I argue that the same is true of purification. The purifying *logos* need not originate from the speaker. Indeed, in the palinode’s view there is no such thing as a discourse that is purely the invention of its “author.” All *logoi* are fundamentally derivative for Plato, for they work by evoking the soul’s memory of the forms. However, some are purifying while others are contaminating.

In order to distinguish one from the other, chapter three turns to the *Phaedrus’* palinode. Chapter three will return to the receptacle analogy, looking at how it is used in erotic contexts. First, however, the chapter meditates on the fact that the palinode, which is itself presented as a purifying discourse, is also presented as a citation. That is to say, when Socrates speaks his

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27 Nightingale opposes “authentic discourse” to “internal aliens,” which reside in the soul without having been examined and either “naturalized or deported” (169).
“purifying discourse,” he speaks the word of another. This illustrates to the fundamentally ambivalent nature of the soul’s relation to logos. In order to purify himself of his blasphemous first speech, Socrates must to risk more contact. At the same time, while a discourse need not originate from the speaker personally to be purifying, the issue of origins is not irrelevant. The relevance of origins is suggested by the fact that Socrates provides his palinode with a genealogy. “(The speech) I shall now pronounce,” Socrates says as he begins, “is by Stesichorus, son of Euphemus, of Himera” (244a). The genealogy is full of etymological play, which is read as giving an initial indication of what constitutes a purifying discourse. Briefly put, the argument is that while the empirical, personal origins of a speech are irrelevant to the question of whether it is purifying, the issue of origins is not. The figure of Stesichorus, the origin of Socrates’ speech, unites the Phaedrus’ two thematic concerns: rhetoric and erotics. Stesichorus, “one who sets up a chorus,” is the son of Euphemus (speaking well) and he is from Himera (the land of desire). This detail is significant, because it implies that, as the heir of Stesichorus, the palinode would be characterized by an original union of eros and logos. Indeed, the palinode’s myth will go on to describe just such a union in the heavenly choruses’ flight toward the forms. Desire and discourse are not only described as being united in their original object, the forms, but this original object is also presented as the end towards which the soul should continue to strive. What the genealogy suggests, I argue, is that the purifying discourse works to restore the original unity of discourse and desire in their original object, the forms.

Taking a cue from its genealogy, I read the palinode with an eye toward the relation that it describes between eros and logos, and what I find is that the technai that study these two phenomena are closely paired. Indeed, I argue that when Socrates reflects on the task of his erotic discourse, he defines it in such a way as to subsume a reformed conception of rhetoric (described in the conversation following the speech) into the more general field of erotics (philosophy). A point by point comparison of what Socrates says his erotic discourse needs to do with the criteria that a “serious” rhetoric would need to fulfill, I argue, shows that rhetoric becomes a subfield of Socrates’ erotics. The reason for this is two-fold: First, both rhetoric and erotics are treated as essentially psychological. Both study the actions and passions of the psyche. They study different phenomena, logos and eros, respectively; but both focus on how the soul acts upon and is acted upon by forces that are experienced as external to it, so at the center of erotics and rhetoric both lies the soul. On the other hand, the definition of the soul as “self-motion” that Socrates develops in the palinode will fundamentally, I argue in chapter four, identify the soul with desire. Ultimately, I argue, “desire” is simply another name for the self-motion that defines the soul. So, the question of rhetoric, insofar as it is a question of how logoi act upon the soul, will be a question of how logoi give shape and direction to the soul’s desire.

The prominent consideration that is given to the soul by the palinode’s erotics and rhetoric necessitates a bit of a detour on the way towards determining what constitutes a “purifying discourse.” This will not take us too far afield however, for if we seek to understand how this purification works, it is necessary to know just what is purified. After having defined the task of his discourse as (1) defining the soul and (2) describing its actions and passions, Socrates immediately runs into difficulties. Socrates provides a definition of the soul as “self-motion” (245c), but as Charles Griswold notes, his definition is abstract and unsatisfying.28 It is not only unclear what this definition of the soul entails for its erotic life, but Socrates’ overweening satisfaction with his apparent accomplishment seems to highlight its inadequacy. Though Socrates does not admit any difficulties as to his definition of the soul, what happens

next suggests an implicit recognition of its need for supplementation. Indeed, the remainder of the palinode consists of a series of supplements to this initial definition.

Following his definition of the soul Socrates signals a change in discursive strategy. Rather than continuing a definitional discourse (one based in *ousia*, being), Socrates begins to discuss the *eidos*—the form, the “look”—of the soul. However, he says is that he *cannot* provide a definitive account of the soul’s form, so he will have to discuss it analogically (through “likenesses,” *eoika*). What follows is the famous myth wherein the soul appears a charioteer with his team of horses. Strangely enough, however, just as Socrates begins to develop this image of the soul, he warns about the danger that images play in psychological discourses.

This warning, which takes place as an interrogation of the role that the body plays in conventional Greek theology, I suggest has a broader relevance as to the epistemological difficulties that one confronts when studying the soul. Socrates’ theological discussion, which I argue, is really concerned with the psychological question of how to represent the soul, attributes to the soul two key qualities that problematize any discussion of it: first, the soul *qua* soul is not visible, so any discussion of it must contend with the difficulty of making it appear; second, the soul is described as eminently mutable. Both of these qualities are linked in Socrates’ description of the soul as “always becoming different in different forms” (*246b, psyche… allot’ en allois eidesi gignomene*). While this description clearly refers to metempsychosis, the stress that it places on fluidity of the soul’s form or appearance makes it difficult to take any appearance of the soul as definitive. Indeed, that is precisely the issue that Socrates takes with conventional theology. He argues that we speak of the gods as if they were “immortal living beings” (*zoa*), whose souls were forever yoked to their bodies, but this is a contradiction in terms, for a while a “living being” is composed of body and soul, the body’s mortality entails that this union cannot be permanent. The force of the critique, I argue, is not just that this leads to contradictions, but that it substitutes one of the soul’s multiple, changing appearances for the soul itself (*246c*). At the same time, this suggests that in undertaking to describe the form of the soul, Socrates has proposed an impossible task: The soul does not have one form, so to treat any one of its manifestations as definitive would be to freeze an essentially mutable, changing object.

I argue that Socrates’ meditation of the problematic role that images play in theology clarifies why he marks a shift in his mode discourse, from the definition of the soul as “self-motion” to an analogical (*eoika*), image-based discussion of its *eidos* or form. The reason for this, I suggest, is that the soul is not conceived as a substance or “thing” that is separable from the actions and passions in which it is manifest, so the attempt to make the soul visible cannot provide one correct answer. For this reason my analysis brackets the debates over the tripartite structure of the Platonic soul; what we find here is a much more fluid conception of the soul than is typically recognized. In making this argument, I endorse the position of Charles Griswold, that the soul is not something separable from its passions and actions (81), while also clarifying how this insight shapes Socrates’ discussion of the soul. Though Griswold notes the change in approach as Socrates moves to his image-based discourse, because he misses the critique of images, he is unable to provide an adequate account of this change in discursive strategy.

Socrates does not resolve the difficulties that attend the use of images in discussions of the soul. Rather, he simply brackets them, saying “let these matters, and our account thereof, be as God pleases” and returns to his comparison of the soul to a chariot (*246d*). This leaves Plato’s
readers to wonder what to make of such images. What is particularly interesting about this move is that Socrates begins to conceive of the soul in very fluid terms. It is always changing, “always becoming different in different forms” (246b, psyche… allot’ en allois eidesi gignomene); it is always becoming different as its desire leads it into different erga and pathè; and as Socrates relates the myth of the palinode, he continues to emphasize the soul’s tendency to be transformed by what it comes into contact with. However, at the same time, Socrates’ image-based discourse seems to aim at mastering this fluidity, attempting to stabilize the soul’s form by yoking it to specific images (just as, he says, we yoke the souls of the immortals to specific bodies).

In the remainder of chapter three, I return to the image of the soul as a receptacle. Describing how it is used in the context of erotic discussions (in the Phaedrus and in the Gorgias) to conceive of the soul’s relation to desire and beauty, I argue that it problematizes the soul’s relation to desire in the same way as it is used to problematize the relation to logos. In light of the foregoing discussion of the soul’s fluidity, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the receptacle image tends to run counter to Socrates’ depiction of the ever-changing soul. Indeed, this likeness of the soul seems to endow it with a solidity and stability that is foreign to the definition of the soul as self-motion. The image, then, seems to affect a hardening of the soul’s boundaries. This image not only marks a boundary between what is inside and what is outside of the soul, cutting across the relationships in which the erga and pathè that constitute the soul are dispersed. I argue that by figuring desire as a fluid that flows into and across the receptacle/soul, the analogy externalizes the most intimate—even “essential” (if desire is the soul’s motion)—experience of the soul.

Figuring desire as a force that comes from elsewhere, threatening to overrun the boundaries of the soul, Socrates’ analogy encourages an attitude of suspicion, so that the soul’s desires will need to be subjected to some test before being acknowledged and acted on. But what is that test? And if the soul does not have a proper form, but is always becoming different as it enters into different relationships, then what would it mean to “purify” the soul? The same questions that we ask about logos must be asked about eros. How, in Nightingale’s terms, do we determine which to desires “naturalize” and which to “deport”?

Chapter Four: The Mythic Topos: Situating the Soul in a World of Relations. This chapter sketches the Platonic/Socratic answer to these questions. In agreement with John Sallis and Kathryn Morgan, I argue that the myth’s “stress on motion is programmatic,” and that it fills out Socrates’ initial definition of the soul as “self-motion.”30 I add, however, that this treatment of psychic motion is articulated within the problem of purification and that the image of motion that the myth provides needs to be read in terms of this problem. More specifically, this chapter argues that the myth in which the soul appears as a chariot that participates in a procession towards the forms, attempts to provide a standard—the soul’s motion toward the forms—which can be used to measure and correct the soul’s empirical experience of eros and logos.

In a different way, then, this image counters the fluidity that is suggested by Socrates’ definition of the soul as self-motion. This image does not trace the boundaries of the soul along the vulnerable surface of its body as the analogy of the receptacle does. Rather, the mythic image of the soul in the procession of chariots provides an image of the soul’s original and

“proper” motion toward the forms. This motion appears most perfectly, not in the human soul but in the movements of the god that it follows. While recognizing that this is not, properly speaking, the definitive eidos that belongs to the soul, the myth suggests that the soul and its desire should not only be identified with this motion but it comprehends this motion as directed in a particular manner. Thus, to the definition of the soul as “self-motion.” I argue, the myth adds, “in the direction of the forms.” And with this qualification, Socrates develops a heuristic that he can use to distinguish between those desires and discourses that purify the soul and those that pollute it. When asking after the purifying or polluting potential of empirical desires and discourses, the question is whether they contribute to or detract from this “original” motion. Alternatively, one might ask whether certain desires and discourses contribute to the soul’s resemblance to the gods of the heavenly procession, for they are treated as models of this same motion, and in its erotic conduct, the individual soul is described as becoming a better or worse approximation of that model.

It is worth pointing out that in this conclusion I am very much in agreement with McCoy’s characterization of philosophical rhetoric as being defined by its orientation toward the forms. However, I argue that more can be said about the ethos or character that this sort of rhetoric (and erotic practice, more broadly) seeks to produce; for the palinode characterizes the soul’s relation to the forms as shaping all of the other relationships that constitute it—its relation to its beloved, its community, its body and its senses. So, as the motion that is the soul is turned toward the forms, its motion toward all of its other “objects” of desire also changes.

In order to begin conceiving of how the turn towards the forms transforms the soul’s relationships, I will examine in particular the myth’s portrayal the soul as being situated amidst a confusion of sensible images. The Phaedrus, I argue, codifies the issue of purification and pollution in terms of an epistemological distinction between doxa (opinion, reputation), which refers to the conflicting realm of appearances (the realm of copies), and episteme (knowledge), which is grounded in the soul’s mythic vision of the forms. The palinode portrays logos as originating in and referring to the same vision of the forms toward which, Socrates insists, we all originally strive. So to the extent that logos work—that it is to say, to the extent that discourse serves episteme—logoi turn the soul away from the conflicting realm of appearances, returning it to its singular vision of the forms. This changes the soul’s relation to the sensible images (doxai) that populate its empirical world, for such images are conceived as copies or approximations that fail to fully embody the virtue of the forms that they instantiate. Deflating their claim to reality, this understanding of the sensible world strives to undermine the hold that such images have on the philosophical subject, freeing him, according to Socrates, of the servitude that they threaten.

This concern is of a piece with the Platonic dialogues’ preoccupation with compulsion, because, as chapters two and three show, sensible images and the discourses of others (i.e., doxa) are consistently treated as alien forces that threaten to the soul with subjection. Thus, when logos works well and conceives of sensible images in light of the forms, it weakens the power with which such images act upon the soul. This situation has consequences, both for the erotic relationship and for the subject’s experience of itself (its body, its senses). If this does not weaken the bond between lover and beloved, I argue, it is at least intended to introduce a superior force (the vision of true beauty), which changes their relation by binding them to the form instead of each other. The erotic relationship, of course, is the palinode’s central concern, but the dualism that the myth embraces structures the whole of the subject’s existence.

Chapter Five: The Subject of Philosophical Eroticism. While chapter four takes a broad view of the way that the myth’s dualism structures the subject’s understanding of his desire,
focusing in particular on the task that it sets of intervening into the individual’s desire in order to redirect it back to its original object (the forms); in chapter five, I turn my attention to the erotic encounter, which is the site of this intervention. What is philosophical eroticism? What is the erotic practice that is premised on this vision of desire? There will be some overlap in the concerns of the final two chapters, for both get at what the *Phaedrus* takes to be the fundamental structure of desire. Still, it is worth taking the time to translate the myth’s erotic vision into a more practical account of how philosophical eroticism structures the relationship of the lover and his beloved, and how this transforms their desires and behaviors in the process.

In recent years, much has been made of the transformational character of philosophical eroticism. Marina McCoy, David M. Halperin and many others, have drawn attention to the manner in which the philosopher’s discourse affects who his interlocutor will become. They are right in doing so. As in the prologue of the *Protagoras*, Plato’s dialogues seem to prompt his readers to ask, “Who is this Socrates? And what will he make of you?” However, because these scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the dialogues’ anxiety over the problem of purity, they tend to overstate the open-endedness of the transformation that philosophical eroticism involves. Celebrations, like Halperin’s, of philosophical eroticism’s ability to enable “a liberation and release of (one’s) own creative energies” do not seem to do justice to the philosopher’s attempt to give form to his interlocutor’s erotic behavior. Insofar as they mask the scripted quality of the erotic relationship, which is always understood as a reenactment of a more original encounter, such descriptions evoke an openness and pluralism that is simply not Platonic.

At the same time, because such interpretations tend to disavow the predetermined course of the erotic encounter, they also tend to mask the power relations that structure it. More particularly, because these interpreters understate the determinate character of the end towards which philosophical eroticism strives, they obscure the power that lover exercises over beloved in bringing about this end. This chapter seeks to offer a corrective to current scholarship in this respect. On the one hand, by examining how Socrates’ palinode figures the lover and his beloved (as a hunter and his quarry, a craftsman and his material/product, a farmer and his field/crop), I argue that the *Phaedrus* continues to represent philosophical eroticism as a hierarchical affair. On the other hand, by closely examining the philosophical lover’s response to his own and his beloved’s experience of *eros* (which Halperin reads as indicating the egalitarian nature of philosophical eroticism), I show more precisely how the lover seeks to correct his beloved’s interpretation of *eros*, thus teaching him how to love and how to live.

I conclude, then, by arguing for the rather traditional understanding of Platonic *eros* as involving a certain disavowal of sensual pleasures and their displacement by philosophical *logos*. Through philosophical *logos*, the dialectic, I argue, the philosophical subject is habituated to constantly referring his specific, object-oriented desires to an ideal, self-identical end. In this manner, the philosophical subject is encouraged to gather himself—to gather his desires, his energies, his *erga* and *pathe*—from the multiplicity of confused, sensible images in which he is otherwise dispersed, in order to commit himself to the contemplation of the Platonic forms. Thus, the dialectic, by constantly referring the beloved’s desire back to the forms—which

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31 “Now whom do you think you are going to, and what will he make of you” (*Prot* 311b). More specifically, the second question reads *tis genesomenos*, “what will you become?”
Socrates insists, he *really* desires—becomes a mode of discipline, training the beloved to resist the powerful influxes of speech and image that threaten to carry him away.

**A Note on Reading:** In recent years one particular approach to the Platonic dialogues has been quite popular. In this approach, a scholar takes a single dialogue as the exclusive focus of his or her analysis over the course of a chapter or an entire book. The idea behind this, as Sean Kirkland points out, is to provide “(an) adamantly internal, exhaustive, and step-by-step treatment of a single dialogue” (xxi). This approach has been quite productive, particularly as it counters the still common approach that G. R. F. Ferrari describes of “read(ing) through the text for its immediate message” – as if the philosophical message could be abstracted from its “literary” surroundings and distilled into a set of propositions. This approach has done well to take seriously the dramatic context in which the arguments unfold, showing how it complicates and is complicated by the dialogue. I have personally learned a lot from such readings. Indeed, my interest in the pragmatics of the dialectical speech situation derives from them. However, I have opted for a different approach. I tend to draw connections between texts more frequently than the method just described, particularly when dramatic and rhetorical resonances lead me to do so. For instance, I will move between dialogues when I see the same conflict being replayed between Socrates and his interlocutors or when a little noticed figure of speech seems to be repeatedly involved in thinking through a problem. When making such moves, I strive to do justice to the rich literary contexts in which such arguments and actions occur. There is inevitably a risk in this, but my hope is that my reader will judge that it was worth it.

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Chapter One: “Bound & Gagged,” On the Nature of the Dialectic

In this chapter, I argue that Socrates’ struggle to impose conditions upon the speech of his interlocutors is marked by recurring crises, moments in which the discussion nearly collapses. It is in these moments of crisis that we learn the most about dialectic, because they are precipitated by Socrates’ attempts to articulate and impose the constraints that constitute his particular mode of speech. It is during such moments that Socrates inflects the term *dialegesthai*, transforming its meaning from the pedestrian activity of “conversing” into the philosophical mode of speech known as “dialectic.” It is during these crises, when Socrates imposes the rules of dialectic over the resistance of those who do not share his methodological assumptions that the dialogues best exemplify the monological force of this imposition. Socrates not only refuses to address questions and concerns about the constraints he imposes, but he proves unwilling to compromise on the question of how to proceed. By portraying Socrates’ dialectical behavior in this way I take issue with the widely held orthodoxy that this practice is “fundamentally open-ended.”

My investigation into the character of the dialectic begins by focusing on these crises. I start by examining what Francisco Gonzalez calls “the central crisis” of the *Protagoras*, a moment during which the near collapse of the discussion prompts the characters to search for a methodological compromise to allow them to continue. I agree with Gonzalez, the discussion of method that takes place during this crisis is not a departure from the dialogue’s primary concern with justice (113). Indeed, I want to extend his insight to suggest that a connection between crisis, method and the dialogue’s concern with virtue can be observed in the *Gorgias* as well.

I differ from Gonzalez, however, in that I argue that Socrates’ imposition of the dialectic’s rules not only precipitates the crisis, but that in this act and in his resolution of the crisis, Socrates conducts himself in a monological and coercive manner. That is to say, Socrates holds to certain methodological rules, the enforcement of which put him in a position to control the conversation. Moreover, though he demands others to submit to certain rules (requiring brevity, sincerity, and privileging certain questions over others), he deflects any criticism or scrutiny of these rules.

Further, I argue that this imposition constitutes a break with the democratic community and the discursive practices that support it. And finally, I critique Gonzalez’s approach to this scene, arguing that his treatment of Protagoras exemplifies the monological reading practices described in my introduction. I am sympathetic to the position that the struggle over method is an ethical one. However, the vehemence of Gonzalez’s attack on Protagoras not only blinds him to legitimate concerns about the dialectic that the latter expresses, but it also prevents him from following the implications of his own analysis regarding the manner in which Socrates’ method constrains the dialectical “inquiry” in advance.

In this crisis, it becomes clear that Socrates and Protagoras’ relationship is not reciprocal, non-hierarchical nor dialogical. And though Gonzalez rightly insists that the dialogue suggests ethical grounds for his refusal to compromise, Socrates neither invokes these grounds nor addresses Protagoras’ concern about his method. The dialectic is simply not up for discussion. Moreover, to grant the ethical justification of Socrates’ behavior as Gonzalez does is to assume

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2 My approach to the Platonic dialogues is akin to Boyarin 2007, Nightingale 1995, and Kahn, Charles H. *Plato & the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996, in that I take the meditations on method of individual dialogues to be part of a more or less unified philosophical project.
3 I largely agree with Gregory Vlastos’ characterization of Socratic questioning as being structured by twin demands, for brevity and sincerity. However I question whether the demand “to give short, spare, direct, unevasive answers to the question put to you” is really “self-explanatory,” requiring no more investigation (Vlastos 1994 35).
Socrates’ perspective, so Gonzalez’s interpretation points back to the problem that prompts the crisis to begin with: How does Socrates impose his conditions upon the discourse of another who does not share his methodological, epistemic and ethical assumptions?

Though my analysis begins in the *Protagoras*, the main task of this chapter is to follow the struggle over method as it unfolds in the *Gorgias*. So, from the *Protagoras*, a dialogue whose namesake “surprisingly” (according to Plato) claims the title of sophist (317b), I turn to the *Gorgias*. Thematically, these dialogues are closely paired. As Socrates says during his critique of rhetoric in the latter dialogue, “while there is a natural distinction between them… because they are closely related, Sophist and rhetorician… tend to be confused with each other” (465c). There is indeed a continuity of subject matter here, and I will address that more explicitly towards the end of the chapter, where I begin to flesh out the ethical stakes of the question of method.

However, the more pressing reason for this pairing is not thematic but dramatic. The same struggle that animates the central crisis of the *Protagoras* is replayed in the *Gorgias*. In fact, whereas the struggle over method comes to a head in the central crisis of the *Protagoras*, because Socrates’ interlocutors consistently resist his attempts to impose conditions upon their discourse, the *Gorgias* takes place in a state of perpetual crisis. The *Gorgias*’ discussion is constantly collapsing. Indeed, it eventually gives way to an uninterrupted monologue (Socrates’ myth of judgment). The shift from the central crisis of the *Protagoras* to the ongoing crises of the *Gorgias*, then not only illustrates the consistency with which Socrates’ imposition of the rules of the dialectic gives rise to crisis in the dialogues and the consistency of Socrates’ conduct in these struggles (e.g., his antagonism, his refusal to accommodate his interlocutor, his exploitation of shame tactics, and so on); it also shows that the struggle over method is animated by a consistent set of concerns. These concerns are ethical. By beginning with the central crisis of the *Protagoras*, the boundaries of which are quite well-defined, then, I hope to bring into focus the manner in which Socrates’ concerns and conduct feed into the crises of the *Gorgias*.

Just as important as the continuities that extend between different instances of Socrates’ struggle to impose his method, however, are the differences. As the crises multiply in the *Gorgias*, Plato is able to emphasize different aspects of the struggle over method. In Socrates’ repeated clashes with Polus, I argue, Socrates not only establishes and reiterates the methodological distinction on which his identity hangs, but in a number of pedagogical moments, he goes on to “instruct” Polus (and the reader) on the proper way of asking and answering questions. What these pedagogical moments reveal is that the dialectical question aims to constrain the speech of the interlocutor. Harold Barrett describes the effect of this type of dialogue well, “To the end of maintaining control…. The system rigidly restricts discussion, insists upon brief statement, denies refutation, [and] arbitrarily acknowledges only the judgments it produces.”

Thus, we see Socrates’ monologism at two levels: At a metadiscursive level, he monologically imposes his rules upon the conversation, refusing to submit his rules to the sort of scrutiny that he demands of others; at the level of the specific argument, the dialectic monologically restricts the scope of the discussion and the contribution that the other can make to it.\(^4\)


\(^5\) As Plato’s dramas unfold, these moments, the formulation of the dialectic’s rules and the practice of the dialectic itself, are not always distinct. However, it is helpful to distinguish between them because former type of moment,
This is an unconventional claim that needs to be motivated. So, in addition to asking about the relationship between interlocutors during the formulation of the dialectic’s rules as well as the relationship that these rules establish and maintain between speakers, my treatment of the *Gorgias* will also ask about the effect that this practice seeks to bring about. The dialectic’s *telos* must be understood ethically as well as discursively. The dialectic’s discursive effect is to constrain the other’s speech, but it is the ethical end that motivates this.

To explore this end, I bring the chapter to a close by turning to Callicles’ exchange with Socrates. This exchange is framed in Socrates’ opening and concluding speeches in terms of the question, “what is the best way to live?” This question, I argue, forms the horizon against which the question of method is consistently posed, and it indicates why the question of method is so urgent. The stakes of the methodological question are shown by Socrates’ exchange with Callicles to be ethical. Or better yet, the stakes of the methodological struggle are *ethopoetic* in that Socrates insists upon his mode of discourse as part of an attempt to *produce* in his interlocutor a certain *ethos* (a certain character, a certain mode of life), which is contrasted with the ethical product of—the ethos produced by—the rhetorical mode of speech.

I. THE QUESTION (?) OF METHOD: Crisis & Community in the *Protagoras*

**CRISIS: The Demands of Dialectic & the Dissolution of Dialogue**

In “Giving Thought to the Good Together: Virtue in Plato’s *Protagoras,*” Francisco Gonzalez argues that what is frequently known as that dialogue’s “methodological digression,” wherein the characters dispute how the conversation is to proceed, is in fact not a “digression” at all. Rather, this dispute, according to Gonzalez, not only takes place at the spatial center of the dialogue, but it forms the dialogue’s philosophical heart (113). Gonzalez does not deny that this discussion centers on a question of method, but insists that there is much more at stake. He argues that Socrates insists that the argument proceed by dialectic and threatens to abandon it if it does not (*Prot* 335c), because it is by means of this method that Socrates seeks to found a new, philosophical community (127). Furthermore, according to Gonzalez, it is within this community and by means of the dialectic that justice, piety, courage, wisdom and temperance, “the truly Socratic ‘unity of virtues,” are actualized (133). In many respects I agree and I hope to show that much of what he says about the *Protagoras* is also relevant to the *Gorgias.* This is so because for Plato the question of method is consistently posed against an ethical horizon; the question of method answers question of what is the best way to live.

The discussion of method that takes place during the central scene of the *Protagoras* consists, in large part, of the audience’s attempt to mediate a dispute between Socrates and Protagoras. What is disputed is how the rest of the discussion should be conducted; and, ironically, the dispute over method threatens to end discussion altogether.

The issue of method is first raised by Socrates not as a question but as a demand. In this respect, I could not agree more with Gregory Vlastos’ description of the way that Socrates conducts himself regarding the issue of method. “Socrates’ enquiries display a pattern of investigation whose rationale he does not investigate,” Vlastos writes, “(t)hey are constrained by rules that he does not undertake to justify.” Vlastos repeats this claim, referring specifically to not only testifies to the emergence of a novel mode of discourse, but if formulated in a monological manner, it also testifies to the limits of reciprocity between speakers in determining how the discussion is to be conducted.


7 Vlastos 1994 27.
the criteria that he demands of a definition. “(Socrates) does not elicit from his interlocutors the logical conditions for the right answer to a ‘What is F?’ question: he produces them entirely on his own initiative, tells the interlocutors what they are, and requires them to comply, never inviting elenctic argument on whether or not they are the right conditions” (33, my emphasis). This is a remarkable claim, because Vlastos recognizes that the very rules of the philosophical investigation, which include fundamental epistemological considerations regarding what counts as an answer and what counts as knowledge, are determined in advance and imposed on Socrates’ interlocutors. Vlastos does not find this problematic, because, he insists, “the interlocutor is never shown as having dissenting views about the logical pattern to which a good definition should conform” (33). In this I take issue with Vlastos. The Platonic dialogues not only show Socrates’ interlocutors resisting the constraints of his method in general, but his interlocutors are also shown to question what constitutes a good definition. We see Protagoras do just this in the central crisis of this dialogue.

The crisis begins when Socrates imposes his methodological demand for brevity in the following context. After having been forced to contradict himself twice by Socrates’ questions and only reluctantly agreeing to continue (333d), Protagoras “begin(s) to bristle” at the conversational role that Socrates assigns him (333e). Indications of Protagoras’ discomfort grow until he finally rejects one of Socrates’ questions and gives a ‘speech’ in which he describes the good as “so diverse and multiform” that it cannot be described in abstract isolation from the specific contexts of which it is a part (334b). The function of this ‘speech,’ which runs about one third of a Stephanus page and so is not terribly long, is two-fold:

First, in a pretty straightforward way, it characterizes ‘the good.’ Though it refuses to give a single definition of the good, it provides several examples of what is good (for specific objects in specific situations), in order to suggest that the good is a complicated—even contradictory—phenomenon. This problematizes Vlastos’ claim that Socrates’ interlocutors never raise doubts about “the logical truths governing definition” (33). Protagoras refuses Socrates’ call for a single definition or general principle that would cover all instances of goodness on the grounds that such a definition would betray the nature of the phenomena under consideration. However, while this is a refusal to provide the sort of definition that Socrates desires, Gonzalez’s description of the answer as a refusal to engage in any discussion whatsoever about what is good is entirely misleading. Protagoras clearly addresses the question, even if his answer does not conform to the demands that Socrates makes of a definition.8

Second, given that the narration of the exchange leading up to this preserves the record of Protagoras’ growing discomfort regarding Socrates’ conduct, Protagoras’ characterization of the good should also be read as a protest against Socrates’ mode of questioning. More particularly, Protagoras’ insistence that the goodness of something depends upon a host of contextual

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8 Indeed, if one demands that we posit a single, unchanging answer to questions of value, as Gonzalez seems to, then one would need to bar approaches to questions of value such as the one Ludwig Wittgenstein develops in his discussion of “family resemblance” terms in *Philosophical Investigations*. There he describes how certain types of words—he uses “good” as an example (77), though he is not exclusively focused on moral terms—seem to signify through a network of affinities and differences in which “similarities crop up and disappear” as one considers new examples. The paradigmatic case, for Wittgenstein is “game,” which covers ball games, competitive games, singing and dancing games, and so on. What emerges as one considers the term is not a single, common feature, but “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (66). Though Protagoras seems to be getting at a similar point as this recognizably philosophical thinker, his answer is refused by Gonzalez as evasion.

considerations—a point whose force depends upon his enumeration of various examples, which resist being subsumed under a general concept—should be read as an appeal for the opportunity to develop more nuanced responses than Socrates’ demand for absolute (yes/no, either/or) answers will allow. Indeed, even Socrates’ narration of this exchange treats Protagoras’ discomfort as the impetus for his eruption into ‘speech’: “Protagoras was beginning to bristle, ready for a quarrel and preparing to do battle with his answers” (333e). By staging Socrates’ narration in this manner, Plato portrays Protagoras’ speech as, at least in part, a protest against Socrates’ mode of interrogation.

Though his Socrates’ narration shows his insight into the connection between Protagoras’ speech and his mounting frustration, on the scene of the dialogue, Socrates does not construe the speech as a sign of protest. Socrates responds neither to the claim that the good is diverse and multiform nor to the protest over the formal constraints of his method. Instead, Socrates takes the opportunity to explicitly thematize and impose the dialectical demand for brevity. “I’m a forgetful sort of man,” Socrates says, “and if someone speaks at length, I lose the thread of the argument… so now since you find me forgetful cut down your answers and make them shorter if I am to follow you” (334c-d). Socrates is anything but forthcoming in the reasons behind his demand. As Boyarin points out (2007 144), his claim to have a faulty memory is not only marked as a joke by Alcibiades (336d), but in making the claim, Socrates inhabits a performative contradiction. The claim to a faulty memory would be unproblematic if the dialogue were presented as a straightforward drama, but Plato gives the dialogue a narrative frame. Indeed, Socrates narrates the event, so, Socrates not only narrates his claim to have a faulty memory, but within a much larger narrative, he also reproduces the speech that he claims he is too forgetful to follow (all without giving any indication that he is having a difficult time remembering it!).

In the immediate context, Socrates will go on to demand brevity no less than four times and he invokes his faulty memory each time. However, if this is not his real reason for demanding brevity, then such invocations constitute repeated refusals to honestly justify his demand. If those who celebrate the reciprocity of the dialectical speech situation are not troubled by the insincerity of Socrates’ behavior, they should be troubled by his refusal to allow his demand to be scrutinized, because his refusal to submit to scrutiny turns the practice of the dialectic into an unquestionable standard.

As the exchange continues, Socrates not only refuses to justify his demand for brevity, but he also refuses to answer Protagoras’ reservation about his mode of interrogation. After Socrates first explicitly demands brevity of him, Protagoras attempts to call this demand into question. Protagoras’ hesitation explicitly thematizes what I have suggested is the implicit protest of his previous ‘speech’. “What do you mean by ‘make my answers short?’ Am I to make them shorter than the subject demands (?)” he asks (334d). Socrates pays lip service to Protagoras’ appeal for the opportunity to make his case. He agrees that his answers should not

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9 It is not clear whether this would constitute a violation of what Gregory Vlastos calls “the sincerity rule,” since Socrates is not technically being questioned, however, this shows the inconsistency of that demand’s application.

10 Within the Protagoras the demand for brevity is only explicitly formulated for the first time here. Nevertheless, up to this point Socrates has effectively, if only implicitly, demanded brevity with the form of his questions. Socrates’ questions have consistently limited the length and possible content of Protagoras’ responses by offering him disjunctions to choose from (usually “yes” or “no”). The result is that when Socrates, still demanding brevity (one and a half Stephanus pages later), is able to gesture back toward the way that Protagoras initially answered him, “briefly and keeping to the point of my questions” (336a). Socrates echoes this gesture in conversation with Polus at the beginning of the Gorgias.
be shorter than necessary. However, despite Socrates’ assurance, what prompts Protagoras’ protest is the sense that this is precisely what Socrates’ questions demand.

Socrates’ assurance does not put Protagoras’ doubts to rest. Indicating a further difficulty, Protagoras asks whether his reply should be “as long a reply as I think necessary, or you (?)” (334e). The concern that he and Socrates may differ over the proper length of a response is perfectly reasonable in this context. After all, the ‘speech’ that prompted Socrates to impose his demand for brevity was not terribly long. The question of how to determine the proper length of a response also quite clearly raises the question of how to fairly enforce Socrates’ brevity-rule. The legitimacy of the concern is borne out by the text. When Socrates “models” how to answer questions, his responses are consistently as long as or longer than Protagoras’ speech.\(^{11}\) So, as Protagoras suggests, the enforcement of the brevity rule is a problem.

What does Socrates say when Protagoras asks him how to determine the proper length of a response? Does he allay Protagoras’ concerns? In a word, “no.” Socrates narrates his response to the question of how to determine the proper length, “What they told me, I answered, is that you have the gift… of speaking… just as you prefer—either at length… or so shortly that no one could beat you for brevity. If then you are going to talk to me, please use the second method and be brief” (334e-335a). Socrates’ “answer” is not an answer at all. Perhaps he flatters Protagoras, but Socrates simply reiterates his insistence on brevity. He does not address the difficulty of determining the proper length of a response.

What begins to emerge in this scene is a pattern of behavior in which Socrates consistently refuses to justify his methodological demands or even address concerns about them. What’s more, far from facilitating an open-ended discussion, Socrates’ behavior—his unilateral imposition of the dialectic, his flattery and his insincerity—contributes to the crisis that threatens to disband the conversation altogether. Leaving the question of how to fairly enforce his rule unanswered, Socrates does nothing to diffuse the crisis. Instead, he contributes to the mounting tension by again feigning a faulty memory and insisting on being unable to follow long speeches (335b). Finally, Socrates brings the discussion to the brink of collapse by threatening to leave. “Since you would rather not (keep your answers short), and I have something to do and could not stay while you spin out your long speeches,” he tells Protagoras, “I will leave you. I really ought to be going” (335c).\(^{12}\) As Socrates stands to make good on his threat, the rest of the company intervenes to suggest a compromise.

I will return to the company’s intervention shortly, but first it is worth taking a moment to see how one of Plato’s more monological readers treats this portion of the dialogue. Gonzalez dismisses Protagoras’ question regarding how to determine the proper length of a response (with its implicit concern with justice) as an evasive attempt to derail the conversation (122). Unwilling to grant the possibility that Protagoras might have a legitimate concern, Gonzalez

\(^{11}\) See 339a-347b. For instance, Protagoras’ speech is more than ten times shorter than the five pages of uninterrupted, poetic exegesis that Socrates will provide (342a–347b). More typically, however, Socrates’ responses are about the same length as Protagoras’ ‘speech.’ Also worth noting is that Socrates does not answer Protagoras’ question directly, but rather takes over the role of questioner and begins to interrogate Prodicus.

\(^{12}\) John Beversluis questions Socrates sincerity here. Despite insisting that he has more pressing concerns, Beversluis points out, Socrates finds the time to relate the whole of this exchange to an unnamed interlocutor whose path he crosses as he comes away from the scene (261). Socrates’ insincerity is bothersome. At times, it is palpably hypocritical. However, more important than his insincerity per se, is the way that he consistently deflects questions about his method. It is on this account that his imposition of the dialectic is monological.
describes his reservation as “an application of the relativism expressed in [his] speech on the good: What is good for Socrates is simply not the same as what is good for Protagoras” (122).

On Gonzalez’s reading, then Protagoras’ refusal of an “objective standard” of length is part of a more general refusal of all objective standards. The stakes of this refusal are high, because Protagoras’ refusal of an external, objective and binding concept of the good, according to Gonzalez, renders him incapable of dialogue and incapable of community.

The refusal of an objective, external and binding concept of the good, Gonzalez explains, renders Protagoras incapable of “genuine conversation” (read: dialectic). He is incapable of dialogue, according to Gonzalez, because, as a practice of examining one’s beliefs, *dialegesthai* requires an external standard against which to measure them. “If there is no standard against which [interlocutors] can judge their opposing views, then there is no common ground between them and therefore no possibility of a genuine conversation” (125). Protagoras’ refusal of any objective standard, according to Gonzalez, not only makes dialogue impossible but it also renders Protagoras incapable of community (*sunousia*, “being together”).

Protagoras is incapable of community because the obligation to submit oneself and one’s views to judgment is produced by one’s belief in an external, universally binding conception of the good. It is this belief in “the good” that both creates and sustains the community. Here one can see how radical Gonzalez’s reading is. On his account, one’s relations and obligations to the community not only issue from this conception of the good; but these obligations are also fulfilled—and the community is sustained—by the practice of submitting to judgment. That is to say, the community is exclusively created and sustained by the practice of dialectic. Thus, according to Gonzalez, the belief that “the good” is external, objective and binding is necessary both for the community to exist at all and for the individual to participate in it.

This interpretation allows Gonzalez to place the blame for Socrates and Protagoras’ strained relations on the relativism of the latter. However, it fails to seriously consider the question that Protagoras has raised regarding the difficulty (later dramatized by Socrates’ answers) of fairly enforcing the demand for brevity. The difficulty of enforcing this rule, the source of its arbitrariness, arises from the richness of the speech situation. As John Beversluis points out, in spite of what Socrates and Plato scholars say, when answering a question, “unbridled verbosity” and “laconic brevity bordering on monosyllabic utterance” are not the only alternatives (11). Even if Gonzalez were correct to insist that there must be some objective standard for speech length, it would not follow that such a standard would be apparent to all. In short, we are still left with the problem of how to determine the proper length of an answer when a dispute arises. And on this issue, neither Socrates nor Gonzalez seems willing or able to provide much guidance. By shifting the blame for the near dissolution of the inquiry onto Protagoras, Gonzalez repeats Socrates’ gesture of sidestepping this difficulty. And in doing so, he not only obscures Socrates’ refusal to address a legitimate reservation about his method, he also obscures Socrates’ role in precipitating the crisis.

COMMUNITY & COMPROMISE: The (Attempted) Democratic Resolution

Gonzalez’s claim that Protagoras is incapable of community also overlooks the fact that within the very scene that is under consideration, Plato dramatizes the existence of another form of community (the democratic *polis*), in which Protagoras and his mode of speech (rhetoric) are at home. Presumably, Gonzalez does not consider this a form of “genuine” community, but it merits some consideration.

The communal intervention and attempt to settle the dispute between Socrates and Protagoras takes place as a series of short speeches that address the issue of how to conduct the
discussion. Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus and Hippias, all of whom had previously only listened to Socrates’ interrogation of Protagoras, now step forward and speak in an attempt to rescue the discussion. Though not wholly irrelevant, what these characters say is less important than how they say it. The form of the discussion of method is noteworthy in that it is not dialectical. This discussion does not progress through a sequence of questions and short answers, but rather takes place as a series of speeches that each independently articulate their own position regarding how to proceed (335d-338c). The discussion of method then models an alternative (rhetoric) to the mode of discourse (dialectic) that Socrates insists upon.

More particularly, the discussion models a form of communal deliberation—demigoreo, public speaking (“demagoguery,” but not in the modern sense, 336b) or euboulia13 (good counsel, 318e), depending on whether Socrates or Protagoras names it. This discursive practice takes place by giving, listening to, and judging speeches. The community’s attempt to resolve the crisis then, not only models what Protagoras claims to teach (318b), what Socrates attempts to suppress, and what Gonzalez says does not exist; it also places this type of deliberation within the context proper to it. The scene places rhetorical speech within the democratic community; a community, whose members stand on equal footing as they participate in deliberating and deciding upon solutions to the community’s problems.

Two particularly salient differences separate the speeches that are given in this context from the mode of discourse that Socrates advocates. First, because these characters are not bound by an overriding obligation to address a narrowly defined question, the situation preserves the equality of opportunity that Boyarin, following Barrett, attributes to the democratic mode of debate (2007 142, 60-62). The second salient difference distinguishing rhetoric from the dialectic in this scene is that the speakers enjoy a greater autonomy. This is ultimately another aspect of the equality of opportunity that the speakers share in, but it is worth noting explicitly. Unlike dialectic, as they succeed one another, the speeches that are given here are not subordinate to the terms offered to them by a previous speaker’s question. Instead, they are given a greater freedom to articulate the grounds upon which their recommendations are based. The result is a greater diversity of opinions. So, for instance, while Alcibiades frames his recommendation that Protagoras submit to Socrates’ conditions in terms of competition (because Socrates has already admitted his defeat in long speeches, makrologia) (336c); Prodicus rejects Alcibiades’ frame of reference and mildly chastises both speakers for behaving as rivals rather than friends (337a-b); and Hippias invokes their natural kinship to motivate them to accept a compromise (337d). Most of the speakers still address previous recommendations. In fact, because they are not forced to answer simple, disjunctively formed questions (as Socrates’ interlocutors typically are), when the speakers articulate their own recommendations, they can more meaningfully criticize the grounds upon which previous solutions are posed.

Far from dramatizing that rhetoric is necessarily monological and that it fragments and undermines the community as Gonzalez suggests (124), the communal attempt to resolve the crisis and preserve the discussion shows that the mode of discourse that Protagoras teaches provides essential support to the democratic community. Gonzalez’s insistence that Protagoras is incapable of community only shows that he is either unable or unwilling to recognize communities that are differently organized. For Gonzalez, it seems, the philosophical community is the only one.

This scene not only dramatizes the role of rhetorical speech within the deliberative process of the democratic community, it also provides a glimpse of a functioning democracy. The communal intervention very nearly resolves the crisis. Hippias proposes the following compromise: Protagoras should restrain the length of his speech, Socrates should relax his insistence on brevity a bit, and they should establish a representative to arbitrate any disputes (337e-338a). The overwhelming majority of those present applaud, approving Hippias’ proposal. By attempting to ensure Protagoras of some amount of autonomy in his responses while still enabling Socrates to hold him accountable and preserving community’s authority to moderate any disputes, for a moment, the community seems to resolve the crisis.

COMMUNITY WITHOUT COMPROMISE: Socrates’ Monological Resolution

If this scene dramatizes the workings of the democratic speech situation, however, it also dramatizes the fragility of this process. For it only takes one man, Socrates, to reject the resolution that the community has ratified and to derail the attempt to find a compromise. Socrates does so on the grounds that he cannot recognize the expertise or authority of any proposed arbiter (338b-c). As a result, Socrates refuses to abandon his method. Of course, Socrates’ rejection of the democratically ratified compromise should not be surprising. His insistence on the dialectic, which is what prompts the crisis, had already constituted a rejection of the democratic speech situation.14

Instead of compromising, Socrates pressures Protagoras into submitting to the dialectic by offering the following counter proposal. “If Protagoras is unwilling to give replies,” Socrates proposes, “let him be the questioner and I will answer, and at the same time try to show him how, in my submission, the respondent should speak. When I have answered as many questions as he likes,” Socrates continues, “let him in return render similar account to me” (338d).15 In the proposal with which he counters Hippias’ compromise, Socrates proves just as obstinate as when he threatened to abandon the discussion altogether (335c). One should be careful not to mistake Socrates’ offer to reverse the roles of the dialectic as an indication of his flexibility on this issue. This is no compromise. If the conversation is to continue at all, it must proceed by the rules Socrates dictates; it must proceed by question and short answer; it must proceed by dialectic.

One should guard against making too much of the dialectic’s reversibility. This reversibility is frequently misinterpreted in two ways. First, it is taken to suggest that there exists a certain equality and reciprocity between interlocutors. They are described as peers, who are bound by mutual obligations. Second, the reversibility of roles and the form the conversation are construed as signs that the dialectic is a cooperative, open-ended exchange.16 These ways of interpreting Plato’s dramatizations of the dialectic, of course, tend to go hand in hand.

Gonzalez can be taken as representing both positions. Citing Socrates’ proposal, he argues, “Here we have a conception of justice or fairness as the interlocutors’ shared responsibility of submitting their beliefs to examination, of exposing them to common scrutiny. Justice is here the recognition that the good is common and that we all have an equal responsibility of submitting ourselves to examination in its pursuit” (126-127). The difficulty that Gonzalez runs into is that he wants to have it both ways. On the one hand, he wants to claim

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14 As Socrates says when he is insisting on dialectic, “Personally, I thought there was a difference between conversing and public speaking” (dialogomenous kai to demegorein) (336b).

15 When Socrates invites Protagoras to treat his behavior as a model of how to conduct a dialectical discussion, this gesture can be read as a standing invitation to Plato’s readers. In this context, however, the irony is that Socrates’ replies will frequently prove to be not only more lengthy than Protagoras’, but also that his poetic exegesis will be insincere (thus, violating what Vlastos calls Socrates’ sincerity rule).

that the practice of dialectic is meaningfully dialogical, that it truly is a shared inquiry into the good. And thus, he must claim that the results are not scripted. They do not represent “some external, nondialogical, absolute standard” (127), but are instead produced through the mutual “give-and-take” of the conversation (124). However, it is difficult to reconcile this picture of the dialectic as an open-ended investigation into virtue with his more radical claim that the dialectic itself is the practical realization of virtue. The difficulty is that the characterization of the dialectic as the practical realization of virtue already presupposes the answer to the inquiry: What is justice? The dialectic. What is courage? The dialectic, and so on.... This position is especially problematic given Socrates’ continual deflection of concerns regarding the dialectic.

At the same time, it is difficult to reconcile Gonzalez’s picture of the dialectic as dialogical with his insistence that certain conceptions of the good and of truth (e.g., that it the good is “variable and manifold”) as incapable of even addressing these questions. For all his praise of the mutual give-and-take of the dialectic, Gonzalez never squarely faces the fundamental restrictions that are implicit in this practice. His characterization of the dialectic as the practical realization of justice, nevertheless, does provide some indication of how the results of the inquiry are constrained in advance. When Gonzalez argues, “justice is... the recognition that the good is common and that we all have an equal responsibility of submitting ourselves to examination in its pursuit,” he indicates two major limitations that structure the inquiry. The dialectic presupposes a certain characterization both of “the good” and of “justice.” However, the presupposition that the good is common is not at all unquestionable. Recognizably philosophical debates take place around this very question. While this characterization of the good does not provide a full-fledged answer to the question of “what is the good;” it does circumscribe the scope of what could constitute an acceptable definition. This limitation is at work when Gonzalez, quite perplexingly, characterizes Protagoras’ statement that “the good is ‘variable and manifold’” as an attempt to “prevent at all costs any discussion of the good” (122). It seems rather, that it is Gonzalez who seeks to prevent certain discussions of the good, as he dismisses in advance conceptions of it that would refuse to treat it as external and independent from the community. What Gonzalez’s reading forcefully, if unintentionally, dramatizes is that the presupposition that the good is common works to exclude certain positions from the start.

Moreover, Gonzalez treats the understanding of the good as something that is common as fundamental to the practice of the dialectic. This understanding of the good is what grounds everyone’s “shared responsibility” of submitting to dialectical examination. We can see in Gonzalez’s definition of justice three intertwined, but discernable moments. First, there is the recognition of the good as common. This recognition does not fully articulate the meaning of the good, though it does hem in the range of possible definitions. More importantly, this act of recognizing the good as such sets it above and beyond the community, as a binding and external standard. And by positing the good in this manner, the instant of recognition takes on a new temporal dimension. The effects of positing the good in this manner are prolonged into the future, as this conception of the good places those within the community under the ongoing demand to submit to examination, to submit to the dialectic. The second moment then consists of the recognition of a conception of justice that is already implicit in this conception of the good—the recognition of justice as our mutual obligation to submit to dialectical judgment. The third moment that is discernible is the practical realization of justice, the fulfillment of our obligations through the dialectic.

This is why, on Gonzalez’s account, Protagoras’ disagreement with Socrates over the character of the good renders him not only incapable of dialogue and of community, but also
unjust. It is not simply that Protagoras resists Socrates’ method of questioning him. Rather, Protagoras approaches the discussion with the wrong conception of what the good is, and this prevents him from recognizing and fulfilling the obligation to practice dialectic. For Gonzalez, it is redundant to say that Protagoras is incapable of dialogue, incapable of community, and that he is unjust, because on his account, the properly objective conception of the good contains within itself an implicit conception of justice as the practice of dialectic, which is what sustains the community. Thus, the dialectic’s practice of realizing mutual obligations to submit to examination, its practice of realizing a particular conception of justice, is premised upon this recognition of the good as common.

What is informative about Gonzalez’s treatment of the dialectic is that it brings out precisely this circularity: Justice begins as the recognition that justice demands submission to the dialectic. The dialectic then is not only premised upon a certain conception of justice, but it is understood as the practical realization of that conception. The practice of dialectic implicitly contains within itself the answers to its most fundamental questions: What is justice? Dialectic. What is courage? Dialectic.

For Gonzalez, this justifies Socrates’ methodological demands. However, it also raises some problems of its own. When the practice of the dialectic acts as the answer to its own most pressing questions, it is difficult to maintain that it represents an open-ended inquiry. The difficulty is not only that this practice assumes a certain conception of the good and that it excludes certain positions from the start, but also that Socrates consistently refuses to address concerns regarding his methodological imposition. On Gonzalez’s interpretation, this refusal to submit his method to “common scrutiny” ought to be read as a refusal of justice itself. Indeed, Gonzalez goes on to recognize the insincerity and interpretive violence that Socrates employs during his poetic exegesis, when he is supposed to be “modeling” of how to submit to questions. Again, this constitutes nothing less than his refusal to submit his opinion to examination. But Gonzalez seems unable to recognize the injustice of Socrates’ behavior (on his own terms), because he is too busy reiterating Socrates’ refusal to allow his method to be questioned.

Within the Platonic text, Gonzalez is right to suggest that this circularity works to justify the practice of the dialectic. However, at the level of the represented dialogue, Socrates does not invoke this ethical justification. Instead, he reiterates his demand for brevity, while feigning a faulty memory and eliding any concern about this demand. In short, for Socrates, there is never a question of method. The issue of how to proceed is settled from the start. Yet, the method that Socrates monologically imposes upon his interlocutors acts as the answer to its own questions.

This seriously compromises characterizations of the dialectic as an open-ended, dialogical inquiry. However, Socrates’ refusal to allow his method to be questioned is particularly problematic, because despite his unwillingness to submit it to “common scrutiny,” he demands that others submit to the conditions he imposes upon their discourse. In his refusal to submit his methodological assumptions and demands to examination, Socrates treats the dialectic itself as “[the] external, non-dialogical standard” that Gonzalez claims it is without.

This leaves us with the following question: If the shared obligation to submit to the dialectic arises out of the recognition of a certain conception of the good, then how does this obligation arise for those who do not recognize the good as such? To the extent that the recognition of the good as such does not take place, the obligation to practice the dialectic does not arise from the interlocutor’s vision of the good. Instead, it is demanded by Socrates in a monological, dogmatic way. Socrates’ voice comes to embody the external, non-dialogical standard to which, he demands his interlocutors conform.
This is why one should be careful not to make too much out of the reversibility of roles within the dialectic. In some sense, participants in this practice are supposed to be bound by the same rules,\(^\text{17}\) so this practice may allow for a restricted reciprocity. However, at a more fundamental level what Plato’s texts dramatize is the struggle over the rules of the game—the struggle between dialectic and other discursive practices—and at that level the Platonic dialogues are not *dialogues* at all. Socrates’ interlocutors are given very little, if any, say in the question of how to conduct the discussion. Within the dialogues, it is Socrates alone who seizes upon the “right” to answer the question of method. Socrates alone manages to impose his will upon the form of the conversation.

The “methodological digression” of the *Protagoras* is exceptional in this respect, because it contains an extended scene in which the community as a whole takes it upon itself to deliberate and to attempt to decide how the conversation is to be conducted. However, Socrates disrupts this community and convinces it to abandon the discursive practice by which it maintains itself. After relating his proposal that he and Protagoras reverse roles, Socrates narrates the response. “Everyone thought this was the right way to proceed. Protagoras was most unwilling, but he had to agree to be the questioner, and then… to submit himself to me in turn and make brief replies” (338e). The irony here is twofold. It is by engaging in the democratic procedure that Socrates is able, on the one hand, to convince the community to abandon this procedure and give up its authority. On the other hand, by engaging in this procedure Socrates is able to pressure an unconvinced and unwilling Protagoras to submit to his demands. Moreover, he is able to do so, because whereas he dismisses the judgment of the community, Protagoras feels bound by it.

This indicates a difficulty that haunts the practice of rhetoric and of democracy—its ever-present temptation and ability to betray itself. However, the fact that the democratic procedure is used to pressure Protagoras to submit to the dialectic should not be taken as an indication that the question of method is settled in an equal and uncoerced manner. In his narration of the crisis, Socrates himself preserves the record of his refusal to compromise and of his refusal to justify his method or to even answer questions about it. Moreover, the narration shows that Socrates consciously exploits the difference between his and Protagoras’ relationships to the community to his advantage in order to pressure his unwilling interlocutor into submitting to the dialectic.

Thus, inscribed within what Gonzalez calls “the philosophical heart” of the *Protagoras* is an image of an alternative form of community. Failing to notice this obscures the fact that in this scene it is not Protagoras but Socrates who places himself outside of the community.\(^\text{18}\) It is true, as Gonzalez argues, that Socrates seeks to found a new, philosophical community, but this comes at a cost. Sacrificed is the democratic community. Sacrificed is the desire and comfort of Socrates’ interlocutors. This is not to say that the comfort or discomfort of Socrates’ interlocutors should be one’s only concern when evaluating such moments. However, to dismiss protests against Platonic/Socratic cruelty as a sign of deficient moral character, or to disavow it entirely, is to render the creation of the philosophical community and the philosophical subject much less ambivalent—much less problematic—than it appears in the Platonic text. While interpreters tend to gloss over these sacrifices, by staging such moments Plato preserves a record of them. Moving forward, my analysis focuses on these moments, the cruelties recorded by Plato and disavowed by Plato scholars, in order to reawaken our experience of the problematic

\(^{17}\) Though, Socrates’ behavior when he answers questions proves problematic in this respect (more below).

\(^{18}\) On the philosopher as an outsider, see Nightingale 1995 13-59.
nature of these creations. As I turn to the Gorgias, I ask about the sacrifices that attend the birth of this new, philosophical community and the philosophical subject that resides there.

II. The Perpetual Crisis of the Gorgias

THE STRUGGLE OVER METHOD: Dialegesthai vs. Rhetorike

Like the Protagoras, from start to finish the Gorgias is preoccupied with the question of method. Though the full significance of the dialogue’s opening banter can only be understood retrospectively, within the first couple of lines of his initial exchange with Callicles, Socrates clearly raises this issue. The distinction has not yet been worked out, but when Socrates rejects Callicles’ offer to have Gorgias give him a “display” (epideixetai) of his oratorical abilities in favor of “conversation” (dialegesthai) (447b-c), Socrates’ gesture anticipates the course of the entire dialogue. The Gorgias as a whole is animated by Socrates’ rejection of rhetoric and its attendant mode of speech (speeches/display), in favor of philosophy and its mode of speech (dialectic/dialegesthai).

After clarifying that he has come to learn “the scope of (Gorgias’) art” (447c), Socrates recasts his initial rejection of “display” as a rejection of the product of “the art of speech making” (rhetorike) (448d). Of course, when Socrates complains that Polus is well versed in rhetoric, but that his speech fails to answer the question (what is Gorgias’s art); and when he insists that Polus return to answering his questions “correctly and briefly” as he had before when he answered with single word utterances (449a), Socrates is rejecting the practice of the very art that he inquires into. Socrates not only rejects the rhetorical mode of speech before even posing the question of rhetoric, but he continually reiterates this gesture and insists upon conversing by question and short answer throughout the dialogue.19

The Gorgias may be the best expression of the Platonic dialogues’ monological answer to the question of method. As in the Protagoras, Socrates insists that he will only allow the discussion to proceed if everyone speaks according to the rules that he dictates. Moreover, in the Gorgias, Socrates’ insistence on brevity instigates a number of exchanges that powerfully resonate with the central crisis of the Protagoras. As soon as the dialogue begins, before even identifying the ostensible topic of conversation (rhetoric), Socrates begins his struggle to control the manner in which the discussion will be conducted. Indeed, Socrates begins his struggle for control before his interlocutors are even aware that this battle is immanent. Thus, when Socrates refuses Callicles’ offer of a “display” in favor of “dialogue” (447c), he has already begun to draw the lines of the dispute. He has begun his dialogue-long rejection of rhetoric. This rejection begins as and inaugurates a methodological distinction, between dialegesthai and epidexetai, that seems innocent enough. However, Socrates will go on to use this distinction throughout the dialogue to regulate and restrain the speech of his interlocutors. The full implications of the distinction have not yet been worked out, but by the end of the dialogue, two distinct and directly opposed ways of life—rhetoric and philosophy—will coalesce around the methodological distinction. The process by which Socrates begins to impose his will upon the form of the ensuing discussion starts so modestly. “Most kind of you, Callicles,” Socrates says, declining his offer to have Gorgias give him a “display,” “but would he also be willing to converse (dialegesthai) with us” (447c)? With this request, Socrates begins to fiercely regulate the manner in which the discussion proceeds. Callicles could not have known that Socrates is in deed already quietly countering his opening words, “This is how they say you should take part in warfare and battle” (447a). But soon enough this request will be transformed.

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19 Gorgias 449a, 449c, 461d-462a, 463c, 466c, are just a few of the places where Socrates insists on his method.
into a demand and reiterated so insistently that Callicles will protest the violence of Socrates’ behavior.

The conflict that gives shape to the *Gorgias* is much the same as the one that animates the *Protagoras*. With the exception of Socrates, of course, the actors in this drama are different, but the question that it pursues is both methodological and ethical. That is to say, the answer to the question of method is meant to give an ethical direction and form to the interlocutors’ lives. Dramatically, perhaps the biggest difference between these two dialogues is that while the conflict over method comes to a head in the crisis at the center of the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias* takes place in a state of perpetual crisis. Whereas the discussion of the *Protagoras* nearly dissolves once, in the *Gorgias*, the discussion is continually on the verge of collapse.

Thus, one finds that in the *Gorgias* the discussion is continually being suspended. Even in the more congenial moments, as when Socrates interrogates the dialogue’s namesake, the flow of the conversation is frequently interrupted by Socrates’ conspicuous praise of the brevity of Gorgias’ responses (449c-d). More frequently, however, the breach seems ready to undo the dialogue altogether: as when Socrates interrupts Chaerephon’s interrogation of Polus and ends up banishing both from the discussion (449a); or as when, upon the latter’s return, Socrates threatens to abandon the discussion if Polus will not play by his rules (462a); or as when Callicles attempts to quit the conversation with Socrates, only to be momentarily delayed by Gorgias’ appeal before finally withdrawing into complete silence (497a-c, 505c-506c). Moreover, as in the *Protagoras*, the moments in which the discussion almost collapses are consistently precipitated by Socrates’ endeavor to enforce his rules of conversation.

**CLARIFYING THE DISTINCTION: What *Dialegethai* Asks, What It Demands**

The trouble begins nearly as soon as the dialogue itself. Once the ostensible topic of conversation, Gorgias’ art and identity (447c-d), has been established, it takes less than one Stephanus page for the opening discussion to break down. Things begin smoothly enough. Polus answers Chaerephon’s first three questions with either affirmations or names. However, as soon as Polus ventures a three sentence-long answer, describing how the arts are constituted on the basis of experience and assigning a rank to Gorgias’ art, Socrates intervenes.

The manner in which Socrates registers his complaint is noteworthy in a few respects. “It is plain, Gorgias,” Socrates says, “that Polus is well equipped to make speeches, but he fails to accomplish what he promised to Chaerephon…. It seems that he does not quite answer the question asked” (448d). First, it is noteworthy that Socrates says anything at all; for once the question of Gorgias’ art/identity had been posed, Chaerephon and Polus had stepped into the roles of questioner and answerer. So when Socrates intervenes, he upsets the roles played by the dialogue’s participants almost as they are taken up. Though Socrates justifies his intervention as an attempt to hold Polus to his promise to answer questions, he does not give Polus a chance to provide a more acceptable answer. Instead of attempting to redirect Polus’ answer to Chaerephon’s question, Socrates addresses his complaint to Gorgias; so he not only interrupts the conversation but he completely displaces both of its initial participants.

While momentarily suspending the ostensible topic of the dialogue (Gorgias’ art, rhetoric), Socrates’ interjection provides him with the opportunity to thematize the rules governing his own art (the art of conversation, *dialegethai*). Despite Gorgias’ suggestion that he redirect Polus’ answer; Socrates insists that he would rather ask questions of Gorgias himself. “For it is obvious from what Polus has said,” Socrates explains, “that he is much better versed in what is called rhetoric than in dialogue (*dialegethai*)” (448d). Socrates, of course, is not only reiterating his initial distinction between display and conversation (447c) while mapping the
former onto rhetoric; he is also rejecting the practice of rhetoric while positioning himself as expert in *dialegesthai*. So, when Polus asks Socrates why he impugns his understanding of dialogue (448e), Socrates’ answer both critiques rhetoric and positively characterizes his own art. Socrates: Why, Polus, when Chaerephon asks in what art Gorgias is proficient, you praise his art as though someone were attacking it, but neglect to answer what it is.

Polus: Did I not answer that *it was the noblest of arts*?

Socrates: Certainly. But no one is asking in *what kind of art* Gorgias is engaged but *what it actually is* and what we should call Gorgias. On the lines laid down before by Chaerephon, when you answered correctly and briefly, tells us now in similar manner what this art is…. Or rather, Gorgias, tell us yourself. (448d-449a, my emphasis)

This exchange, and the opening of the dialogue as a whole, is frequently cited by scholars who are in the process of reenacting Socrates’ gesture of dismissing Polus for his ineptitude as a dialectician. For instance, E.R. Dodds, who describes this exchange as the text’s “first lesson in logic” for Polus, uses it to justify his dismissal from the discussion (193). Dodds writes,

(Polus) is as innocent of dialectical method as Gorgias himself, but displays an unteachable stupidity beside which Gorgias looks quite intelligent. When graveled for an argument, he falls back on an appeal to popular opinion (471cd), on bursts of rhetorical derision (473b-d), or on ill-bred laughter (473e). He is intellectually and morally vulgar, and he measures Socrates moral stature by his own (471c8).

The reproduction of this gesture of dismissal, with respect to Polus and a wide variety of Socrates’ interlocutors, is commonplace in Plato scholarship. This is not surprising, for it issues from a gesture that is repeatedly made by the dialogues themselves. However, though it is rare, on occasion some scholars question the speed with which this gesture is reproduced. John Beversluis, for one, notes that in their dismissal of Socrates’ interlocutors as “inept dialecticians,” Plato scholars more often than not fail to notice that the “rules” these interlocutors are cited as violating are frequently unavailable to the interlocutors themselves (31). Such is the case with Polus.

Polus is understandably confused when Socrates moves to banish him from the discussion on the grounds that he is not well versed in dialogue (*dialegesthai*). Socrates, of course, has insisted on dialogue before, and Polus has agreed to proceed in this way. However, Polus is unaware that Socrates is giving the term *dialegesthai* his own particular inflection. Wherein a more mundane sense it is possible to utter upwards of three sentences while still “conversing,” it is precisely this “prolixity” that attracts the scorn of Socrates (and generations of scholars following him). Polus’ confusion stems from the fact that it would have been

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21 To different ends, the reiteration of this gesture is critiqued by Boyarin 2007 18; Beversluis 2000 2; and Nehamas, Alexander. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. 11.
22 For example, describing Polus’ return to the dialogue, Eric Voegelin writes, “(Socrates) formulates the condition under which he will enter into discussion with him…. Polus will have to restrain the prolixity of speech (*makrologia*) in which he indulged earlier, because the interminable suave flow of clichés in his speech makes discussion impossible” (26). One should also note that if Edward Schiappa is correct to argue that Plato coined the term, *rhetorike*, in the *Gorgias*, then one can understand the difficulty Polus had answering the question of what Gorgias’ art is with a single word. This linguistic resource necessary for doing so would simply not be available to him. Schiappa, Edward. “Did Plato Coin *Rhetorike*?” *The American Journal of Philology*. 111.4., 1990. 457-470.
impossible for him to know that the “dialogue” required brevity of such a degree. Socrates suggests that Polus could have found some guidance in Chaerephon’s opening questions since they dictated single-word responses. However, it is only after Socrates interrupts the conversation and points to these previous answers as exemplifying what he requires that this degree of brevity explicitly demanded.

It is also worth noting that in this exchange, when Socrates demands brevity, he cannot formalize a hard and fast rule regarding length. Rather, as in his resolution to the crisis of the Protagoras, where he offers to provide an example of how to submit to questions (338d), it is to examples that he points in this context as well. Socrates’ reason for invoking examples rather than giving a fully explicit rule regarding length is understandable. The reason is that the situation in which one speaks is too complex, too supple and full of possibilities, to be made subject to a fully explicit rule. Just at the level of what can be said, the encounter that takes place when two people speak to one another will resist and exceed any attempt to fully regulate it. Nevertheless, what the Platonic dialogues show time and again is that Socrates works very hard to do just that. As Socrates begins his discussion with Gorgias, he again reiterates his insistence on his manner of speaking, hosper nun dialegometha (dialectic); he again clarifies that this requires brevity in answers, kata brachu… apokrineshia; and he again rejects “lengthy speeches” such as those made by Polus (mekos ton logon) (449b). And Gorgias promises to do his best to satisfy Socrates, but he invokes the same difficulty that Protagoras indicates. An overly rigid demand for brevity cannot override the host of contextual considerations that one responds to when answering questions. “There are certain answers,” Gorgias tells Socrates, “that must necessarily be given at length” (449c). Protagoras, of course, goes on to draw out the difficulty that this produces for any attempt to fairly enforce Socrates’ brevity rule. In this context Gorgias does not raise that concern, and its enforcement goes undisputed. However, as soon as Polus returns to the dialogue, the enforcement of the constraints Socrates puts on the conversation quickly manifests its arbitrary character. That is, if its arbitrariness were not already evident in Polus’ banishment for his break from the pattern of giving single-word responses.

While undeniably important, the brevity requirement is not the only positive characteristic of Socrates’ art of conversation (dialectic) that can be gathered from his rejection of rhetoric. Coupled with the demand for brevity is a prescription for a certain type of question and answer. Socrates’ rejection of Polus’ answer gives him a chance to clarify the scope of the question (and answer) that dialectic calls for. When he explains Polus’ failure to answer the question, Socrates tells him, “You praise his art… but neglect to answer what it is (hetis… estin).” The first part of this response, which characterizes Polus’ speech as vacuous praise, anticipates Socrates’ much fuller critique of rhetoric as flattery (464b-465e), but I will return to that later. What is important to notice here is that when Socrates underscores the question, what is it? he begins to disqualify certain answers as falling outside of the range of what constitutes an acceptable response. Dodds treats Polus’ response to this criticism, “Did I not answer that it was the noblest of arts?” as illustrating his dullness and his ignorance of dialectic (193); and it is certainly true that this question betrays a failure to understand Socrates’ critique.

However, when scholarly treatments of this scene give way to Polus-bashing, what is lost is the novelty of Socrates’ question. This question, hetis estin/tis estin, is of course recognizable to modern Plato scholars as Socrates’ famous “What is x”-question, and it is understood to be

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23 The same demand will be reiterated for the third time within the span of one page at 449c; and after the dialogue begins to proceed on his terms, Socrates still presses the issue, insisting on praising Gorgias’ brevity (449d).
novel. So to see Socrates insist on it is far from surprising. What is lost in many scholarly treatments of this famous question, however, is an eye to its pragmatic effect in the context within which it is uttered. While contemporary scholars recognize this question as novel, they bring to it a whole set of assumptions that assimilate it to their understandings. The result is that Plato scholars anticipate Socrates’ explanation. “No one is asking in what kind of art Gorgias is engaged but what it actually is (oudeis erotas… tis he Gorgiou techne, alla tis… ontina).” Within the dramatic context, Polus’ failure to understand Socrates provides him with an opportunity to clarify that what he wants defined is the very being, the very essence, of Gorgias’ art. What his question seeks is what it is that makes it what it is, independent of any accidental, external relations or non-definitive qualities. When contemporary readers dismiss Polus’ response as a failure to understand the question, they are predisposed to take the parameters of the question and the answer it implies for granted. When Dodds describes this scene as Polus’ “first lesson in logic,” he assumes a timeless, universal logic to which the dialectical question is attuned, ignoring evidence that Socrates is in the process of forging this logic.

The dismissal of Polus, then has become part of the habitual response to the Platonic dialogues that takes Socrates’ question and the parameters that he insists it dictates for its answer for granted. So, if one can suspend this response for a moment and again encounter Socrates’ question in its novelty, both when it is initially posed, and when it is redefined against competing questions, then perhaps it can again be asked whether there really is only one way to respond to the question. Is Polus so off base when he suggests that he had addressed the question that Socrates insists upon? Is it not possible that one can learn a significant amount about a certain art or practice by considering its relation to other arts and practices, by considering how it is constituted, and so on? Is it really so far out of the realm of possibilities that one can consider Polus’ response an answer to Socrates’ question?

In short, what I want to indicate is that Socrates’ question—whether as it is initially posed or by the way in which he specifies it—sets significant restrictions upon the direction that the conversation can take. The coupling of Socrates’ “what is x”-question and his insistence on brevity helps Socrates seize upon and limit the direction in which the discussion can unfold. In this scene in particular, what we see is that Socrates’ question, as it is first formulated and then refined, will determine which considerations are admissible and which are not. It is worth noting some of the specific considerations that are excluded, because they will come up again when Polus returns to the conversation (though it is not Polus who reintroduces them). Specifically, Socrates insists that no one is asking about what kind of art rhetoric is, what its relation to other arts is, how the art of rhetoric is constituted, or about its relationship to experience (empeiria) (448c-449a). As Socrates reiterates his question, he begins to carve out a more and more limited range of acceptable answers. As is the case in Socrates’ opening exchange with Polus, however, this question seems to require some vigilance on the part of the questioner if it is to successfully constrain the range of answers. Far from being settled once the “what is x”-question is posed, the constraint seems to require an iterative effort on the part of the questioner.

In fact, in the second scene in which the methodological dispute gives way to an extended crisis in the Gorgias Socrates seems intent upon demonstrating the necessity of strictly enforcing the limits of this question. Paradoxically, however, Socrates does so by playing the role of answerer and resisting the very same limits that he has just insisted the question dictates.

24 Indeed, leaning on the authority of Aristotle’s biographical references to Plato and Socrates (Met. A.6, 987a12-b12), it is commonplace for scholarly portraits of the “historical” Socrates to treat his formulation of the “What is x”-question (i.e., his interest in universals, to katholou) as his definitive philosophical innovation.
RESISTING THE QUESTION/TEACHING TO QUESTION: The Collapse of Dialogue

After having been banished from the discussion by Socrates, Polus’ return reinvigorates the struggle over method. This time, however, Socrates not only reiterates the distinction between dialogue and speechmaking (rhetoric), insisting on the former, but he comports himself much more pedantically towards Polus as he works to teach him the art of *dialegesthai*. Again, it is as the discussion is in the process of collapsing that one learns the most about the dialectic. This seems to be why, after insisting on dialogue Socrates resists the very process that he demands. Socrates appears to resist Polus’ questions to better teach him how to ask questions. Whatever one makes of Socrates’ pedagogy, the force with which he rebuffs Polus’ attempt to question him effectively suspends the dialogue, rendering Polus’ role in it superfluous.

Polus’ return follows a relatively peaceful exchange between Socrates and Gorgias, during which Gorgias submits to Socrates’ conditions and is forced to contradict himself. Polus breaks his enforced silence by expressing astonishment and asking Socrates whether he is stating his true opinion. With false modesty, Socrates thanks Polus for coming to set him and Gorgias aright and offers to retract any admission that is objectionable. This, no doubt, might be taken as testimony to the dialogical character of the dialectic, an indication of Socrates’ openness to the contribution of his interlocutor, but to what extent is Socrates open to revising his position, and on what questions?

What happens next suggests that on the question of method, Socrates will again refuse all compromise. Before allowing Polus to rejoin the discussion, Socrates insists upon the same rule of conversation that he had invoked when dismissing him. If Polus is to speak again, he must satisfy Socrates’ demand for brevity. “I am willing to retract whatever you desire,” Socrates patronizingly tells him, “provided that you observe one condition…. that you restrain that exuberance… which you set out to use at first” (461d). Polus bristles at this condition, and asks, “What? May I not speak at what length I please?” (461d). At this point Socrates adopts the same strategy that he successfully employs in the central crisis of the *Protagoras*. He threatens to leave. Socrates acknowledges that in Athens of all places, it would be unfair to deny Polus the power to speak, but he explains that he feels no qualms about denying Polus the opportunity to do so. “Would it not be hard on me,” Socrates asks, “if I may not go away and refuse to listen when you speak at length and will not answer the question? But if you have any interest in what has been said and wish to set it right… question and answer in turn… refute me and be refuted” (461e-462a). It is noteworthy that Socrates explicitly links the issue of length to the quality of the answer, for he not only insists on brevity, but he positively links the length of a response to its status as an answer. The implication seems to be that once a certain length is reached, a response can no longer be considered an “answer,” but should instead be cast aside as evasion.

Also worth noting about Socrates’ strategy is that despite the obstinance he displays in his threat to abandon the conversation if it is not conducted as he wishes; his final appeal, “if you have any interest in what has been said,” has the effect of shifting the burden of responsibility for the near collapse of the discussion onto his interlocutor. Socrates offers Polus the same bargain he offers Protagoras. He is willing to take turns asking and answering questions. However, if anyone is going to amend his manner of conducting himself in the discussion, it will certainly not be Socrates. The responsibility for accommodating one’s interlocutor—ultimately, the responsibility for the continued pursuit of the conversation—once again rests upon the shoulders of Socrates’ interlocutor. At least, this is how Socrates represents the situation.

As is typical, Socrates’ representation of the situation is commonly taken at face value. Describing this moment, T.H. Irwin writes, “(Socrates) *allowed* Polus full freedom to say what
he wanted (461e-462a), *even allowing him to ask questions if he liked* (462b); and he made sure that Polus could withdraw any of Gorgias’ allegedly over hasty concessions (461d, 462a). On all these points Socrates disavows any attempt at eristic coercion.” 25 Freedom indeed! Despite his refusal to recognize a power dynamic in this interaction, Irwin preserves the hierarchy of this scene. Polus is given the full freedom to say what he wants, provided he wants to speak according to Socrates’ dictates. Of course, it does not occur to Irwin (as it does not occur to most) that a constraint upon the manner in which one can speak might also produce a constraint upon what one proves able to say. Nor does it occur to him to question why Socrates is delegated the authority to determine what his interlocutors are or are not allowed to do and say.

Like Protagoras, Polus proves unwilling to allow the discussion to collapse on his account, so he bends to Socrates’ demands and steps into the role of questioner. The crisis, however, has not passed. What follows is a very tense exchange, in which the roles of questioner and answerer are only nominally preserved. The exchange begins as follows:

Polus: Answer me Socrates. Since Gorgias seems to you at a loss regarding the nature of rhetoric, what do you say it is? [*auten tina fes einai*]

Socrates: Are you asking *what art* I hold it to be?

P: I am.

S: To tell you the truth, Polus, *no art at all.*

P: But what do you think rhetoric is? [*alla ti soi dokei he rhetorike einai*]

S: Something of which you claim to have made an art…

P: What do you mean?

S: I call it a kind of routine. [*empeirian egoge tina*]

(462b-c, my emphasis)

From Socrates’ first response, one can tell that this is not going to go well. Rather than exemplify the degree of brevity he requires of Polus and answer the question with a single-word utterance (448e), Socrates answers his question with another question. Moreover, Socrates’ response (“are you asking what art I hold it to be?”) actually transforms the question. Polus had followed Socrates’ lead and patterned his question, what do you say it is (*auten tina fes einai*), on the question that Socrates had insisted upon while dismissing him from the conversation (*hetis estin/tis estin*) (448e, 449a). The issue of art or the inflection of the question by this concern (what art is it) is not entirely new. Nonetheless, Socrates’ “clarification” of Polus’ question introduces a whole set of concerns that were absent from the question as it was initially posed.

Socrates’ reinterpretation of the question, then sets up the evasion with which he again refuses to give a definition: “To tell you the truth… no art at all.” Dissatisfied with Socrates’ refusal of the terms of his question, Polus reasserts it, again following the pattern established by Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue, “But what do you think rhetoric is?” (*alla ti soi dokei he rhetorike einai*). Needless to say, this iteration of the question is no more successful at reining in Socrates’ response. He again refuses to answer what it is, and instead reiterates what rhetoric is not, an art. When an understandably exasperated Polus asks, what do you mean, he loses control of the discussion altogether.

This allows Socrates to address the question that he had been working to answer all along. The question of what rhetoric is has not ceased to be a concern, but in the more immediate context, what Socrates has been working to address is the question of what an art is. More particularly, Socrates wants to make a distinction between art (*techne*) and routine (*empeiria*), and by introducing the issue of art into Polus’ question, he has set himself up to make

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this point. Socrates’ dialectical behavior here is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, his interpretation of Polus’ question constitutes a refusal to answer the straightforward identity question that Polus has borrowed from Socrates himself. Second, by inflecting the question in the way that he does, Socrates actually introduces the very same concerns—not only about the relation between rhetoric and other arts, but also about the relation between art and experience (empeiria)—he had treated as irrelevant when Polus raised them in his first “speech.”

Indeed, the distinction that Socrates makes between techne and empeiria picks up the language of Polus’ “speech” and directly opposes his characterization of experience (empeiria) as the foundation of art (techne). Moreover, in the immediate context, it is precisely these same concerns—further specified as the relation between the true arts and their imposters—that Socrates will go on to deliver a long speech about. In short, Socrates’ has effectively transformed Polus’ question (what is rhetoric) into the question, what kind of routine is rhetoric (462c). And in doing so, Socrates has set himself up to speak of the same things about which he had previously told Polus, “no one is asking” (448e). Thus, Socrates is guilty of effecting the exact same “evasion,” albeit more cynically and successfully, for which he had banished Polus.

The beginning of this exchange, then, already illustrates that the dialogue is a sham. Socrates not only fails to exemplify the degree of brevity that he had demands of Polus (Boyarin 2007 187), but he also surreptitiously reinterprets Polus’ questions in order to transform them into the questions he wants to address. Moreover, by reinterpreting Polus’ questions and by answering in a consistently evasive manner, Socrates actively resists Polus’ attempt to follow his lead in posing questions that prioritize definition or identity.

At this point in the dialogue, the illusion that we are witnessing the “give-and-take” of two independent voices is stretched pretty thin. Far from modeling reciprocity and submitting to questions in turn, Socrates seems intent on frustrating any question that comes his way. As the exchange continues, the illusion of that we are witnessing anything that even remotely resembles a cooperative or open-ended endeavor completely collapses. The “dialogue” continues:

P: Then you think rhetoric is a routine?
S: Subject to your approval, I do.
P: What kind of routine?
S: One that produces gratification and pleasure.
P: Then do you not think rhetoric is a fine thing, if it can produce gratification and pleasure among men?
S: What Polus? Have you already learned from me what I consider rhetoric to be, that you proceed to ask if I do not think it a fine thing?
P: Have I not learned that you call it a kind of routine? (462d, my emphasis)

Socrates’ question, “have you already learned what I consider rhetoric to be,” marks a slight change in the character of Polus and his interaction. Namely, when Polus asks whether rhetoric is a fine thing, Socrates does not reject the terms of the question (as he does when he denies rhetoric is an art); rather, he rejects the position of the question within the conversation. That is, he criticizes Polus for asking about the qualities of the subject before establishing its identity.

This moment in the conversation can be read as insisting on the priority of definition or the priority of the “what is x”-question. Indeed, in just a few lines, Socrates will again disparage Polus in much the same terms. Registering his complaint with Gorgias, Socrates says, “[Polus] does not realize that I have not yet answered him, but proceeds to ask if I do not think it something fine. But I shall not answer whether I consider rhetoric a fine thing or a bad until I have first answered what it is. For that is not right (dikaion)” (463c, my emphasis). There is an
inescapable irony to Socrates’ insistence on the priority of establishing identity. The fact is that Polus had sought a definition of rhetoric from the start, but Socrates had evaded the call for a definition by surreptitiously reinterpreting the “what is x”-question. So now, Socrates admonishes Polus for inquiring into the qualities of rhetoric without having first ascertained a definition, but it is Socrates himself who has frustrated this search.

Socrates’ frustration of Polus’ efforts to question him is important in three ways: First, by resisting Polus’ questions, Socrates creates a series of pedagogical moments, during which he can take Polus to task for his failure to give the proper form and order to his questions. Pedagogically, this exchange also works to instruct the reader about the need to show vigilance in one’s questions. Nothing shows more clearly than Socrates’ behavior when answering questions that the first iteration of a question does not ensure that its limits will be respected.

Secondly, Socrates’ frustration of Polus’ questions works to effectively suspend any meaningful form of dialogue, ensuring rather, that Socrates is able to have his say with minimal interference. I have endeavored to show that this has already been the case from the start of this exchange. However, Socrates’ outright rejection of Polus’ question marks a turning point insofar as what Socrates had done before by stealth, he now does overtly. Rather than reinterpreting Polus’ questions and responding in a way that maneuvers Polus into asking the questions he desires, Socrates now begins to directly dictate the questions he wants Polus to ask.

The opening series of questions and answers that follow this shift works, on the one hand, to develop a parallel between rhetoric and cookery, which will culminate Socrates’ speech critiquing rhetoric (464b-466a). On the other hand, the opening series of questions and answers provides a step-by-step reenactment of Polus’ initial attempt to question Socrates regarding the nature of rhetoric. In doing so, this series of questions underscores the continuity between the first part of this exchange and the present part, despite the sudden shift produced by Socrates’ introduction of a new topic (cookery).

Socrates begins to dictate questions to Polus by echoing back to him the reverse of the imperative with which Polus began his questions. To Polus’ “Well then… answer me” (462b), Socrates responds:

*Then ask me* what kind of art I consider cookery?

P: I will. What art is cookery?

S: No art, Polus. (462d)

Redundantly enough, Socrates goes on to reject the terms of the very question that he had put in Polus’ mouth—what kind of art is cookery—which of course are the same terms that he had previously used to reinterpret and reject Polus’ question regarding rhetoric. Essentially the same sequence of questions and answers that had been uttered before follow: no art, Polus… a kind of routine… one that produces gratification and pleasure (462d-e). The reason for this parallelism, and for Socrates’ abrupt introduction of the question of cookery, is indicated by Socrates’ insistence that both of these practices are species of flattery. With this addition, the sequence circles back to culminate in Socrates insisting again that the question—this time, unasked—of whether or not something is fine must be deferred until after its identity is ascertained (463b).

While the exchange has come full circle since Socrates has begun dictating what questions for Polus to ask him, Socrates is far from having exhausted the questions that he has for himself. Rather, Socrates’ reiteration of the priority of definition, like the previous iteration of this priority, ends with him issuing further instructions on what to ask. “Then if you wish to
question me,” Socrates instructs Polus, “ask me what part of flattery I claim rhetoric to be” (463c). Polus complies and the “dialogue” continues.

At this point, Polus’ is effectively silenced. His role in the dialogue is almost entirely appropriated by Socrates, whose questions he now simply echoes back to him. Moreover, with the exception of a lengthy speech, in which Socrates finally identifies/defines rhetoric (464a-466a)—during which, of course, Polus is completely silent—for the next four pages, Polus’ contribution remains the same. Polus officially continue on as questioner, but Socrates continues to dominate him, dictating to him(self) the questions he wants to answer.

The breakdown of the conversational roles illustrates the dialectic’s non-dialogical character. Boyarin puts the matter well, “The arbitrariness of this procedure, its coerciveness emblematized by Socrates now dictating, not only the answers, but the questions that Polus must ask, fully exemplifies… the fatally non-dialogical nature of… Socratic dialectics” (2007 189). The dialectic’s pretense to dialogue completely breaks down here. The distinction between the roles of questioner and answerer at this point is formally preserved, but in practice, it has been rendered meaningless. Boyarin is right. As Socrates’ questions circulate from him to Polus back to him, the “dialogue” betrays the fact that it proceeds monologically. This not only renders claims about the open-endedness of the dialectic problematic, but given that Socrates is modeling and commenting on how to behave in this undertaking, this exchange cannot be dismissed as “uncharacteristic.” Socrates’ behavior is presented as paradigmatic.

The breakdown of the speaking roles in this scene also renders problematic any claim about the reciprocity of the dialectic that depends upon the reversibility of these roles. If this is how Socrates behaves when he “submits” to questions—that is, if Socrates’ submission consists of a persistent refusal to be questioned—then scholarly claims regarding the reciprocity and cooperation that underlie this practice also ring false.

Finally, Socrates’ frustration of Polus’ questions also works to reassert the distinction between the art of speechmaking and the art of conversation. More particularly, Socrates’ resistance to the questions reiterates the methodological distinction in such a way as to bring out what, following Vlastos, one might call the “existential dimension” of the distinction. That is to say, when Plato underscores Polus’ failure to interrogate Socrates, he asserts the rhetoric/dialogue distinction in the persons of Polus and Socrates. Plato not only makes clear who has mastered the art of dialectic and who has not, but the characters themselves seem to get integrated into this distinction. Those who practice these different arts/routines become a meaningful part of the distinction between dialogue and rhetoric.

This helps to explain the antagonism that Socrates displays toward Polus throughout this exchange. What is particularly striking about Socrates’ behavior is that he continues to show this aggression toward Polus—consistently frustrating the question and insulting the questioner—even after reducing him to near complete passivity and silence. At this point, Socrates determines what questions will be answered and what further questions those answers will

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26 Vlastos 1994 9. Eric Voegelin makes a similar point under the rubric of “The Existential Issue,” where he insists that Socratic questioning is not simply about abstract propositions, but also about the life that is lived by the characters involved in the dialogue. I want to suggest further that in the Gorgias, at a more formal level—over and above the content of the question/response—the mode of discourse itself (dialegesthai vs. makrologia) is incorporated into different character or ethical types (philosopher vs. rhetorician). Voegelin, Eric. Order & History, v. 3: Plato & Aristotle. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1956. 24-28.
prompt, so Polus is superfluous to the “inquiry” into rhetoric. However, while Socrates refuses all of his contributions, Plato preserves just enough independence for Polus as it takes to allow him to provoke Socrates’ ire (it does not take much). The dialogue continues:

S: If you wish to question me, ask me what part of flattery I claim rhetoric to be.
P: I will then; what part?
S: I wonder whether you will understand my answer. Rhetoric in my opinion is the semblance of a part of politics.
P: Well then, do you call it good or bad?
S: Bad—for evil things I call bad—if I must answer you as though you already understood what I mean.
Gorgias: Why, Socrates, even I myself do not grasp your meaning.
S: Naturally enough, Gorgias, for I have not yet clarified my statement. But Polus here, like a foal, is young and flighty.

(463c-e, my emphasis)

Even when Polus complies and asks Socrates the exact question that he has been directed to ask, Socrates abuses him, casting doubts upon his intellectual stature. “I wonder whether you will understand my answer,” Socrates says, before responding to the question that he has instructed Polus to ask him. Socrates only becomes more abusive when Polus takes the initiative to ask a question of his own. After Polus asks whether rhetoric is good or bad, Socrates moves from calling Polus’ intelligence into question to positively dismissing it. “Bad—for evil things I call bad—if I must answer you as though you already understood what I mean.”

Socrates is correct to insist that Polus does not understand him. However, Polus’ failure to understand is largely due to Socrates’ own resistance to being understood. When Socrates answers his own question—what part of flattery is rhetoric—he clouds the issue by neglecting to use the terms in which the question is posed. What part of flattery is rhetoric? The semblance of a part of politics? In this answer Socrates does not refuse terms of the question, but he also does not use them. When he answers that rhetoric is a semblance (eidolon) of a part of politics, he does nothing to clarify what part of flattery it is. The answer displaces “flattery” altogether. Of course, Socrates is continuing to develop the same vocabulary that he uses when instituting a distinction between techne and empeiria. However, there is no way for Polus to understand this, because there is no way for him to know that Socrates will go on to insist both that there is a mimetic relationship that exists between flattery and the true arts, and that politics is one of the true arts. That is only be clarified when Socrates interrupts his interrogation to give a speech. It is ironic that when he wants to be understood Socrates practices the very mode of discourse that he has prohibited.

27 Suggesting the general relevance of the monological quality that dialectic displays here, the interlocutor again becomes superfluous later in the Gorgias. After Callicles refuses to answer any more questions, Socrates continues asking and answering questions by himself (505e).
28 This is typical of Socrates’ strategy of rebuffing Polus’ questions and of ensuring his need for instruction makes itself felt. He constantly shifts the terms of the discussion so as to always withhold some crucial aspect of his response. For instance, by withholding the term “flattery,” Socrates appears to provide the same definition for both rhetoric and cookery (a routine that produces pleasure and gratification). And this allows him to instruct Polus that one cannot ask about the value of these practices before establishing their identities by asking “what part” of flattery they are. Then, by withholding any mention of the relationship between the true arts and flattery, Socrates ensures that Polus cannot understand his response that rhetoric is the semblance of politics. This again allows Socrates to take Polus to task for not prioritizing the question of identity over the question of value.
Socrates himself seems to recognize that it takes some time to develop this vocabulary in such a way as to be understood. At least, his comment that “I have not clarified my statement” seems to suggest as much. Nevertheless, while Socrates neither expects nor is intent on being understood by his questioner, this does not stop him from heaping abuse upon Polus: “Polus here, like a foal, is young and flighty.” Moreover, while Socrates seems to recognize that Polus does not understand him because he does not define terms that he uses unconventionally; this does not prevent him from behaving as if Polus could not be counted on to understand a much more conventional vocabulary. Thus, Socrates condescendingly stops to define his much more conventional usages—evil things (kaka) I call bad (aischra)—so as to turn definition into insult.

The ongoing exchange between Socrates and Polus, of course, is not simply an opportunity to heap scorn upon the latter. Socrates’ aggression not only underscores Polus’ need for instruction, thus justifying his appropriation of the role of questioner. His aggression is a function of the ongoing dispute over method. What will become apparent in the speech with which Socrates delineates the true and false arts is that the methodological dispute and the antagonism it breeds is part of an ongoing struggle between the true arts and their simulacra.

It is not necessary to replay the rest of Polus’ attempt to interrogate Socrates here. Suffice it to say that the distinction between speaking roles continues to break down, as Socrates employs the same strategies to justify his insistence upon playing both parts. Things remain much the same when the interrogation continues after Socrates’ long speech. The only significant difference seems to be that the methodological criticisms of Polus are registered at a more general level. Socrates’ criticisms become less specific, as he wonders whether Polus is asking him questions or beginning to deliver speeches (466b, 446c). Socrates’ critique of Polus’ questions becomes less concerned with the pedagogical aim of teaching him the art of dialectic than with reasserting the methodological distinction between dialectic and speechmaking.

This shift in emphasis makes some sense. After the interval in which Socrates interrupts his interrogation to deliver a long speech that finally clarifies his critique of rhetoric, it is understandable that Socrates should feel compelled to reassert the methodological distinction that separates rhetoric and dialogue. He is, after all, the philosopher who speaks as an expert in the art of conversation (dialectic), as distinct from rhetoric. Socrates’ speechmaking puts him in a tenuous position, for in the same way that he suggests that his question regarding “Gorgias’ art” is equivalent to the question of “who Gorgias is” (447d), Socrates’ identity also depends upon the distinction by which his art is defined. Moreover, the manner in which Socrates’ identity depends upon this distinction is recast in this context in a second register. In the speech with which he interrupts his interrogation, he explains that sophistry and rhetoric together are semblances that compete with the true art, the political art, which Socrates will later claim as his own. Thus, Socrates notes the danger that rhetoric poses to philosophy—it threatens to displace philosophy, to contaminate it, to undo the boundaries that separate it from Socrates’ own practice. Socrates’ identity is doubly at stake. Socrates, the dialectician, and Socrates, the true political artist, are both threatened by the presence of the rhetorician.

What lends Socrates’ reiteration of this distinction its renewed urgency, however, is the fact that Socrates describes the threat that rhetoric poses in a rhetorical speech. As Socrates himself says when concluding the speech, he has acted strangely (465e). His speech is atopus, out of place, in that it has diverged from the methodologically distinct place that he has carved out for himself and philosophy. While warning that rhetorician counterfeits the dialectician and true politician, Socrates, the true politician, plays the rhetorician. Moreover, when he is done
playing this part, Socrates again submits to the questions of a rhetorician, who acts the part of a dialectician. In short, in this scene Socrates not only diagnoses the threat of confusion that carries with it the ability to undo his identity, but he does so in way that intensifies that threat.

MODES OF DISCOURSE/MODES OF LIFE: The Ethical Horizons of Philosophy & Rhetoric

There is a lot at stake in the question of method. As the *Gorgias* progresses, what initially seems a purely methodological insistence regarding how to proceed—*dialegesthai*, not *epideixetai*; short question and answer, not speeches—comes to take on increasingly urgent, ethical overtones. What Gonzalez suggests about the *Protagoras* is also true of the *Gorgias*. The question of method is posed against an ethical horizon. It is fitting then that Socrates concludes the dialogue with an exhortation that is both methodological and ethical.

Amid all these arguments… this alone stands steadfast, that we should be more on our guard against doing than suffering wrong, and that before all things a man should study *not to seem* but *to be good*… and that if anyone proves evil… he should be chastised, and next to being good, the second best thing is to become good and to make amends by punishment, and that we should avoid every form of flattery… and that rhetoric and every other activity should… be employed to attain justice…. Then let us follow the guidance of the argument… which reveals to us that this is the best way of life (*tropos aristos tou biou*)—to live and die in the pursuit of righteousness and all other virtues. Let us follow this, I say, inviting others to join us, not that which you believe in and commend to me, for it is worthless, dear Callicles. (527b-d, my emphasis)

A couple of observations are in order about what it means to follow Socrates’ invitation and “to live and die in the pursuit of righteousness (*kalos kagathos*).” First, it should be noted that this way of life is contrasted with *that* life that Callicles has commended. So, while references to living and dying in the pursuit of righteousness may seem rather vague, one can get a more concrete sense of what “the best way of life” involves by inquiring into this contrast.

What way of life does Callicles commend? The final sentence does not specify, but there seem to be two possible ways of interpreting it. On the one hand, one can understand the life that Callicles advocates as one in which the individual fosters and ministers to unchecked desires with no regard for conventional distinctions between good and bad pleasures (492a). One is perfectly justified in understanding the life that Callicles advocates and that Socrates dismisses as worthless in this way. After all, once Callicles introduces his conception of natural justice (482c-484c), the second half of the *Gorgias* is largely consists of Socrates’ effort to refute this position.

However, this is not the only way of approaching the question of what life Callicles commends. One might also understand the life that Callicles advocates in terms of a second position that he lays out at the start of his encounter with Socrates. At the beginning of their exchange Callicles launches into a speech that divides its attention equally between two issues. First, he lays out the conception of natural justice that is expressed in the life indicated above (482c-484c). It is important to note however that this speech, which ends just before the physical center of the dialogue and sets the agenda of its second half, dedicates an equal amount of time and space to admonishing Socrates to give up philosophy for rhetoric and politics (484c-486c).

Moreover, underscoring the importance of the second half of Callicles’ speech, it is latter issue—the choice between philosophy and rhetoric—that first attracts Socrates’ attention. Thus, Socrates only enquires into Callicles’ conception of natural justice after spending nearly one and a half pages showering Callicles’ advice with ironic praise (486d-488b). This all culminates in a
statement that prefigures the concerns and language of the dialogue’s conclusion. “Of all inquiries, Callicles, the noblest is that which concerns the very matter with which you have reproached me—namely, what a man should be, and what he should practice and to what extent…. As for me, if I act wrongly at all in the conduct of my life, you may be assured that my error is not voluntary but due to ignorance” (487e-488a). The choice between rhetoric and philosophy, described here as a question of “the proper conduct of (one’s) life” (orthos pratto kata ton bion) is articulated in a way that suggests the continuity of this issue and Socrates’ closing concern with tropos aristos tou biou, the best way of living.

In order to understand the choice between these competing ways of life, it is first necessary to understand Callicles’ reproach of Socrates. Callicles admonishes Socrates, telling him that he has persisted too long in the study of philosophy. This persistence, he continues, results in Socrates’ neglect of political affairs. And this is shameful because it is only through participation in the affairs of the polis that one can practice virtue. Borrowing the words of Euripides’ Zethus29 and assuring Socrates of his brotherly good will, Callicles tells him, “You neglect, Socrates, what you most ought to care for, and pervert a naturally noble spirit by putting on a childlike semblance, and you could neither contribute a useful word in the councils of justice nor seize upon what is plausible and convincing, nor offer any brilliant advice on another’s behalf” (486a). In short, Callicles tells him, it is only in the polis, through the practice of rhetoric, that virtue, wisdom and justice are realized. Callicles’ Euripidean borrowing seems to render his position on the question of one’s mode of life a bit more conventional than his praise of natural justice might otherwise suggest. It is not completely incommensurable with the latter position, since Callicles also specifies that the superior man realizes natural justice by the exercising of political power (491d).

More important than the question of consistency, however, is that through this borrowing Callicles comes to bear a greater resemblance to Polus and Gorgias. Callicles resembles them not only in the nobility that he attributes to the practice of rhetoric, but in that he also locates this practice within the democratic community. Moreover, unlike Socrates, who gestures toward truth and speaks of claims that are bound by “arguments of iron and adamant” (509a); Callicles echoes the more modest epistemological framework of Gorgias. Like Gorgias, who is willing to admit that neither the orator nor his audience necessarily knows the right answer to the question that occasions the use of rhetoric; Callicles employs phrases such as “the useful word” or “what is convincing and plausible,” which suggest more modest epistemological aims. In short, Callicles seems to share the same epistemological assumptions and ethical/political horizon as his predecessors in the dialogue. While it may be surprising to catch Callicles sounding a bit more conventional, it should not be surprising that in his more conventional moments he comes

to sound like his predecessors. It is after all precisely on these grounds, their deference to custom, that Callicles criticizes them (482d). So, while one might not expect such moments out of Callicles, his criticism suggests that ultimately there is an affinity between his position and that of Polus and Gorgias. This resemblance indicates that Callicles is the true heir to the previous argument, and that his dispute with Socrates is but another iteration of the same debate.

Callicles’ conception of natural justice may seem like a novel addition to the dialogue, but the struggle that he enters into with Socrates is not. The question that they offer competing answers to—what constitutes the best way of life, the rhetorical or the philosophical—is a more fully articulated version of the same question that has animated the dialogue from the start. Up to Callicles’ entrance into the dialogue, this struggle had been thematized by the question, what is rhetoric, and dramatized in the ongoing dispute over method, but only incompletely. While Socrates’ exchange with Callicles is but one more episode in the competition that the dialogue stages between rhetoric and philosophy, it is not until this portion of the dialogue that the terms of this struggle are fully articulated.

It is not until Callicles joins Socrates in conversation that the second and true (according to Socrates) claimant to title of “the best life” is named. Though it is not Callicles who first names philosophy, the first use of this word coincides with his entrance into the dialogue. In response to Callicles’ expression of astonishment at what he says, Socrates claims to act as a mouthpiece of philosophy. Explaining to Callicles that they both share the experience of being unable to contradict their beloveds, Socrates disclaims responsibility for what he says:

Each of us is in love with two objects—I with Alcibiades, son of Clinias, and philosophy, and you… with… the Athenian demos and Demos, son of Pyrilampes…. [And] whatever your beloved says… you cannot contradict him, but constantly shift to and fro…and say what it wishes…. You must believe that you’re bound to hear me say things like that, too, and instead of being surprised at my saying them, you must stop my beloved, philosophy, from saying them. For she always says what you now hear me say… and she’s far less fickle than my other beloved… but what philosophy says always stays the same. (481d-482a)

There is a lot happening here. Socrates positions himself as the mouthpiece of philosophy while representing Callicles as the model rhetorician and echo of his beloved demos. Also, though this time the distinction is not methodological, Socrates again opposes his way of speaking with his interlocutor’s, contrasting the constancy of philosophy with the vacillating quality of rhetoric. Thus, the parallelism between Socrates and Callicles also indicates that there is an important relationship between one’s object of desire, one’s speech and one’s mode of living. There is more to be said about this, and the rest of this dissertation will largely be an attempt to unpack all that this implies. However, for the time being, suffice it to say that when Socrates highlights the difference in substance, manner, and origin of his and Callicles’ speech, he is reinforcing the lines of conflict that have been taking shape since the start of the dialogue.

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30 Socrates’ description of Callicles’ vacillating speech—the way in which he “constantly shifts to and fro” (ano kai kato metabolammenoi) in order to echo his beloved—prefigures his later description of the desirous part of the soul, which “is of a nature to be swayed and to shift to and fro” (493a, anapeitheshai kai metapipein ano kato). In the later context, Socrates describes how desire and the soul itself is susceptible to being transformed and redirected through persuasion. I will discuss this “swaying to and fro” in the third chapter, where I take up the images that Socrates uses to conceive of the soul. However, it is worth marking the way in which both of these descriptions draw together speech and desire, describing Callicles’ vacillating speech as the effect of desire and the undisciplined soul’s vacillating desires as the effect of speech. As Socrates distinguishes between philosophy, “the true political art” (dialectic), and rhetoric, we will see that the relation between speech and desire becomes extremely important.
For now, the following is what needs to be kept in mind: When the dialogue first mentions philosophy, it is Socrates who uses the word in order to identify himself as its representative. And though philosophy looms large in the background of everything that comes before, like a cipher, informing all of Socrates’ claims and struggles, it is noteworthy that it is not mentioned until nearly half way through the dialogue, when the final interlocutor joins him. This suggests that while Callicles’ exchange with Socrates is a reiteration of what came before, it is only in its third iteration that this struggle is fully articulated.

**MOTIVATING THE CONFLICT: Philosophy & Its Doubles**

Prior to Callicles’ entrance into the dialogue, the conflict between philosophy and rhetoric is given its sharpest expression in the critique of rhetoric that Socrates develops in his speech to Polus (464b-466a). Socrates deploys a complicated analogy in order raise his concern regarding the effect of rhetoric upon the well being of the soul. According to Socrates, there are two arts of care for the body, *gymnastics*, which maintains the condition of the healthy body and *medicine*, which cures the diseased body. The art of caring for the soul—what Socrates calls “the political art” (464b)—he explains can likewise be subdivided into two arts. Analogous to the maintenance of the healthy body by gymnastics is the work of *legislation*, which trains the soul. The second art of caring for the soul is *justice*, which like medicine, steps in once something has gone awry. Just as medicine tries to purge the body of disease, the practice of justice seeks to purge the soul of injustice (464c).

The place of rhetoric in this is clarified as Socrates works out the terms of his analogy:

There are then these four arts which always minister to what is best (to *beltiston*), one pair for the body, the other for the soul. But flattery perceiving this—I do not say by knowledge but by conjecture—has divided herself also into four branches, and insinuating herself into the guise of each of these parts, pretends to be that which she impersonates. And having no thought for what is best, she regularly uses pleasure as a bait to catch folly (anoian) and deceives it into believing she is of supreme worth. (464c-d, my emphasis)

Unlike the arts (*technai*), which are capable of explaining all that they produce because they operate with a knowledge of causes and, more important, with an eye toward what is best; rhetoric, like all species of flattery, is a routine (*empeiria*) that actually competes with and displaces the true art that it impersonates. Lacking even a distinction between the pleasant and what is best, all species of flattery are described as trading on pleasures—the semblance of the good—to the detriment of the respective objects of care.

Each art finds its pandering and dangerous double. Medicine’s painful procedures and bitter draughts, which are done in the name of what is best (health), are forced to compete with the sweet and savory products of the practice of *cookery*. This practice, of course, produces

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I take issue with Sean D. Kirkland’s contention that in Plato’s early dialogues Socrates affects a “violent rejection of the *techne*-model” of virtue, such that “we should be very suspicious of any interpretation that finds Socrates advocating a *techne*-model of virtue, even as a regulative ideal for his questioning.” Kirkland, Sean D. *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato’s Early Dialogues*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012. 70. Though Kirkland recognizes that Socrates sometimes introduces the term *techne* into the conversation, he insists that it is only to articulate the assumptions of his interlocutors. This is not the case here. Though Polus claims that rhetoric is a *techne* (448c), he describes *empeiria* (experience, routine) as the foundation of *techne* and Socrates vehemently rejects this premise. “I refuse the name of art to anything irrational (*alogon*)” (465a). Socrates’ conception of a *techne* for the care of the soul, then, simply cannot be attributed to Polus or anyone else. It is also worth pointing out that Socrates not only claims to practice the “true political art” later in this text (521d), but that his critique of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* describes rhetoric’s failure as an art using the same conception of *techne* (270b).
pleasure but it never even asks which, if any, of its products are capable of restoring the body’s health. As an alternative to the training required by gymnastics, cosmetics offers the body the semblance of health and beauty. However, it not only fails to attend to the health of the body, but the deceptive surface that it produces positively obscures the need for such care (465b). With respect to the care of the soul, rhetoric and sophistry have developed as routines for producing the semblance of justice, but failing to even investigate what is best these species of flattery merely trade on pleasures. By enabling one to don the semblance of justice, for instance, rhetoric allows its practitioner to escape the valuable and cleansing pain of punishment (465c).

The upshot of Socrates’ analogy is twofold. On the one hand, he uses this analogy to critique rhetoric and sophistry, insisting that because they do not pose the question of what is best for the soul, they are unable to properly discern and judge the value of conflicting pleasures. Such judgment requires a principle beyond pleasure that could be used as a standard to decide between competing pleasures (465a). Not only are these routines incapable of such judgment, but even in the production of pleasure, they work by habit, irrationally, alogos—without the logos needed to understand pleasure’s cause. On the other hand, Socrates’ analogy articulates the conditions of the conflict that is played out throughout the dialogue. By figuring rhetoric and sophistry as imposters or false claimants of the political art, Socrates’ analogy begins to explain the source of the dialogue’s chief conflict. These practices compete with the true political arts whose appearance they counterfeit and whose effects they counteract. This is the source of the antagonism between philosophy (the true political art) and rhetoric. It is the source of the antagonism between Socrates and his interlocutors.

Philosophy, of course, is not explicitly mentioned in this portion of the dialogue, however, it is clearly a concern. Even if philosophy is not the subject of thematic treatment here, it is represented in the person who undertakes the critique of rhetoric. When Socrates speaks, after all (as he later tells Callicles), he merely echoes what philosophy has to say. Moreover, though philosophy is not mentioned explicitly, one is perfectly justified reading “the political art” or “the arts of caring for the soul” as its equivalents. Within the analogy, this equivalence is not yet explicit. However, in conversation with Callicles, Socrates—the voice of philosophy—will claim that in contrast to the most celebrated politicians and orators of Athens’ past, he is the one “engaged in the true political art” (521d, epicheirein te hos alethos politike techne).

THE TEST: Distinguishing the True and False Claimants—Socrates & the Imposters

What remains implicit when Socrates describes to Polus the competition between the true and false arts of caring for the soul is made explicit when he speaks to Callicles. When Socrates speaks to Callicles, he reiterates his more technical, abstractly formulated rejection of rhetoric (on the grounds that it fails to fulfill the conditions of an art) in historical terms. In the

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32 Socrates’ critique of rhetoric also makes an interesting connection between the orientation of techne toward the question of “what is best?” and its claim to knowledge. This seems to be why Socrates insists that flattery perceives by conjecture, not knowledge, that there are four arts to imitate. This distinction between pleasure and what is best, in the Gorgias seems to develop into two different logics, one of which might be described as being relevant to the sensible and the other to the intelligible. In this context and in his discussion with Callicles, Socrates elaborates the difference between these logics. He argues that the bodily experience of pleasure and pain is marked by a constant confusion because in this experience opposites (pleasure/pain, thirst/satisfaction, etc.) always coincide (495e-497a). In contrast to the confusion of the sensible, the opposites relevant to the question of “what is best” (good/bad, justice/injustice, health/sickness, etc.) operate as exclusive disjunctions. They never coincide. In chapter five, when I discuss the relation between Socratic discipline and the forms, I will argue that the practice of the dialectic, particularly in its demand for “yes” or “no” answers—its attempt to exclude any ambivalence from the range of permissible answers—is an attempt to institute, justify and enforce the latter (“ideal”) logic.
penultimate portion of the *Gorgias*, leading up to myth of judgment with which he calls Callicles to the practice of philosophy, Socrates leads Callicles through a series of questions designed to condemn the leading statesmen of Athens’ past (515c-521e). This historical iteration of his earlier critique culminates in Socrates locating himself in competition with the great orators and statesmen over the claim to the true art of politics. Indeed, he does not stop there. Socrates not only enters into the competition, but he raises himself above the crowd of false claimants.

Socrates begins the historical iteration of his rejection of rhetoric by invoking the same distinction between flattery, which “makes pleasure the end of its association” and the true arts, which aim at “what is best” (513d). He then specifies what it means to aim at what is best within a political context. “Should we not then take in hand the tending of the city and its citizens with the aim of making the citizens themselves as good as possible?” (513e) Callicles assents to this proposition, but resists Socrates’ characterization of its implications. Because the improvement of the citizen is the aim of the political art, the product (the citizen), Socrates supposes, should also be the evidence by which the statesman is judged. Callicles agrees that a doctor can be judged by the health of his patients, an architect by his buildings, and a potter by his pots (514c-e). He even agrees that a shepherd, *epimeletes* (one who cares), can be judged by his flock (516a), but he hesitates to extend this principle to the political arts.

Callicles’ hesitation, however, does not stop Socrates from using the improvement of the citizens as a test of the great statesmen of Athenian history. When Callicles initially resists this test, it is formulated as a personal question. “Come now, has Callicles ever yet improved any of the citizens,” Socrates asks. Callicles does not assent to the validity of this test, but says, “You are contentious, Socrates” (515b). Briefly mirroring his interrogation by Polus, Socrates responds by again inhabiting both positions within the dialectic. “Have we not many times already agreed that this is the task of a statesman? Have we acknowledged it or not? Answer me.” And instead of waiting for a response, Socrates answers his own question, “We have; I shall answer on your behalf” (515c). Socrates is right, this has been agreed upon. However, when Socrates impatiently answers his own question he robs Callicles of the opportunity to clarify his position or to register an objection; and there is room for argument here.

There is a gap between the proposition (that the political art aims at improving the citizen) and Socrates’ attempt to use the improvement of the citizen as the test of the politician. Socrates justifies this test by analogizing the politician to a potter, an architect, and a doctor (who at least operates upon a more responsive body). However, this analogy assumes that the politician exercises a huge degree of the control over his “product.” Like Callicles, one can agree with the aim that Socrates attributes to the political arts while still questioning the validity of his test.

Socrates, nevertheless, acts as if the validity of the test follows from what had been agreed upon, and he proceeds to apply the test to the great statesmen of Athenian history. “Carry your mind back to those men” he instructs Callicles, “Pericles and Cimon and Miltiades and Themistocles…. If they were good, obviously each of them made better citizens of those who were worse before. Did he do this or not?” (515c-d). After reasserting the test over a hesitant Callicles, Socrates also makes clear that he will not tolerate any amount of ambiguity or

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33 See Arendt 1998 220-230, for a compelling critique of the consequences of thinking of the political in terms of fabrication. In a section called “The Traditional Substitution of Making for Acting,” Arendt traces those terms to Plato’s use of the *techne* analogy, and argues that the analogy effaces the essential multiplicity of the political realm, tempting the political actor to try to assert more control over an action than properly belongs to political. In its most extreme flowering, according to Arendt, this impulse culminates in totalitarianism.
ambivalence in Callicles’ answers. So, when Callicles says “perhaps” in response to the question of whether the Athenians were better or worse at the start of Pericles’ reign, Socrates will instruct him, “there can be no ‘perhaps’ about it… it must be so from what we have admitted, if he was really a good citizen” (515d). But can there be no “perhaps” about it? There is much more room for examining assumptions, clarifying propositions, and articulating a more nuanced interpretation of the evidence, than Socrates’ demand for an unqualified “yes” or “no” allows.

Socrates, however, forbids such responses, and this enables him to steer the conversation toward its predetermined end. Socrates asks Callicles a series of questions that not only insist upon unqualified answers, but that essentially dictate affirmations: “Do you not consider any man a poor trainer of any animal… if they are tame when he takes them over, but he makes them wilder…? Do you agree or not?” “Is man a member of the animal kingdom or not?” “And was it not men of whom Pericles assumed charge?” “Then ought he not… to have made them more just… if indeed he was a good statesman?” “And gentle…?” (516b-c). At each step along the way, Callicles reluctantly agrees to the propositions Socrates feeds him. Of course, being forbidden to call the questions that Socrates poses into question—as Socrates had when questioned by Polus—Callicles is hardly free to disagree. His contribution is narrowly circumscribed by Socrates’ questions, so that he is left with no resources to resist the slow, steady progress of Socrates’ argument.

Finally the series of questions come to a head, quite tellingly, not with a question but with an assertion. “But Pericles made them wilder than when he assumed charge of them” Socrates insists (516c). At this point, Callicles smartly indicates the crack in the façade of the “dialogue,” and he coolly reminds Socrates that he forgot to phrase his answer in the form of a question. “Do you want me to agree with you (?)” Callicles asks, marking the breakdown of the “dialogue” (516c). Of course, the upshot of all of this is that Pericles, along with Cimon, Miltiades and Themistocles—all of whom suffered at the hands of those they led—are shown to be no statesmen at all.

Socrates is willing to grant Callicles’ objection that their accomplishments surpass those of the present day politicians. However, as Socrates proceeds to launch into a speech, he insists that their similarities to current politicians are more important than their differences. They were more successful servants than those of today and better able to provide the city with what she desired. But as to giving those desires a different direction instead of allowing them free scope, by persuading and compelling citizens to adopt course that would improve them… they were practically in no way superior… though this is the only true office of a good citizen (517b-c, my emphasis).

At this point in the historical critique of rhetoric, the consequences of techne’s ability to distinguish what is best from the pleasant become tangible. It is only because the true political art is armed with this distinction, according to Socrates, that it is able to discern between pleasures in order to reorient desire toward what is best. The historical figures targeted by Socrates turn out to be nothing more than examples of the rhetorician—flatterer, servant of pleasure—who was already described in the speech he directed to Polus. The “great statesmen” are one with this generic type in that they give desire free reign because they lack any principle distinct from pleasure by which they could discern the value of competing pleasures and desires. Though more successful than present day politicians in satisfying the citizens’ desires, according to Socrates, Pericles and his illustrious company share in the same failing as their successors. In fact, Socrates contends that they prepared the failures of their successors. “(Paying) no heed to
discipline and justice… (they) filled our city with harbors and dockyards and walls and revenues and similar rubbish,” all of which has left the city “swollen and festering” (518e-519a). The same practice to which these statesmen owe their reputations—the undiscerning cultivation and satisfaction of all the citizens’ desires—is what constitutes their failure as statesmen. Whether by undertaking public works projects or instituting pay for service, it is the undiscerning cultivation of desire that is said to have enlarged the scope of the citizens’ desire beyond manageable bounds, leaving them savage and ungovernable.

The important distinction then is not between the great statesmen of old and their less successful successors, for they all share in the same practice. The distinction that counts is one of kind. It is a distinction between those who minister to any desire, whatever it may be, and those who are able to discern between pleasures and redirect desire toward what is best. The distinction is between those who practice the true art of politics, “the only true office of a good citizen,” and those falsely claim this art. The historical iteration of Socrates’ critique indicates that there is a whole host of flatterers and false claimants. This crowd is not limited to those targeted by the historical critique, but rather extends to the whole generation of politicians and orators unworthy of mention. Presumably, this would include Gorgias, Polus and Callicles.

Callicles, of course, is of particular interest because he acts as a representative of the (sham) political art when he echoes his beloved demos and calls Socrates to attend to politics. More importantly, Callicles is of particular interest because he is figured as the epitome of rhetorical education. In fact, Socrates’ characterization of the practice of “the great statesmen” should sound very familiar. It is not only that his attack on the statesmen renders concrete the more abstract critique that is addressed to Polus. It should also sound familiar because the most important feature of the practice that Socrates attributes to them, the undiscerning cultivation and satisfaction of all desires, is, at the level of the polis, the same practice that Callicles celebrates as the life expressing “natural justice” (491e-492c). With his criticism of the great statesmen, Socrates not only underscores the continuity of this discussion with the previous critique of rhetoric, he also reiterates the same basic objection that he makes to Callicles’ conception of natural justice: It fails to distinguish between pleasure and the good (497c).

Socrates brings his exchange with Callicles full circle. What initially appear to be two separate concerns, Callicles’ conception of natural justice and his celebration of rhetoric, are two sides of the same coin. It is not simply that rhetoric is a means that one employs while striving to satisfy all of one’s desires. Rather, the life expressing Callicles’ conception of natural justice is portrayed as the inevitable product and continuation of rhetoric’s refusal of any standard beyond the pleasure. Walter Hamilton and E.R. Dodds, separately, make similar points. When discussing the succession of Socrates’ interlocutors, each loosely describes it as telling a story of growing corruption: whereas Gorgias’ skepticism does not prevent him from respecting social mores, his pupils are increasingly unmoored from convention (Hamilton 8-13, Dodds 5-15). I agree, this is the lesson we are supposed to learn, but their descriptions seem incomplete. It is not simply that Gorgias fails to prevent his teaching from being radicalized at the hands of younger generations; rather, because it lacks the superior value (to beltiston) the practice of rhetoric is portrayed as having internal logic that naturally produces the character of Callicles.

If Callicles, with his conception of natural justice, stands in as the product of rhetorical education, then he must be understood as the product both of the great statesmen and of Gorgias. This means that the same test that Socrates applies to the statesmen, the dialogue implicitly applies to Gorgias. The test then not only brings the exchange with Callicles full circle, but also does so with the dialogue as a whole. Callicles (and Polus) are both examined as a way of...
testing their teacher. Their examination is a way of asking, has Gorgias ever yet improved any of the citizens? This helps to explain why so little of the Gorgias’ discussion actively involves the eponymous character. It is not that Socrates gives up his initial questions: what is the scope of Gorgias’ art? What does Gorgias teach? Who is he (447d)? Rather, Gorgias is examined as the statesmen are, by examining the product of his art which is embodied in his students.

Socrates indirectly draws out this parallel when he ties this test back to his refusal to allow Gorgias to deny responsibility for the actions of his students. Socrates tells Callicles, Conditions, it seems, are much the same for those who pretend to be statesmen and for Sophists. Your Sophists… (are) guilty of absurd behavior, for they claim to be teachers of goodness, yet they often accuse their pupils of wrongdoing…. And what could be more illogical than this claim that… men who have been stripped of injustice… should act unjustly by means of an injustice which does not dwell in them? (519c-d)

Socrates does not mention Gorgias by name. However, by insisting upon the teacher’s responsibility for the state of his student’s soul and the actions that issue from it, Socrates brings the conversation back to the concession by which he led Gorgias into contradiction. Gorgias, who had maintained a distinction between rhetoric and the study of justice, had attempted to maintain the moral neutrality of rhetoric. Likening the teacher of rhetoric to a boxing coach, Gorgias had insisted that the teacher of rhetoric taught a skill, persuasion, which can be used for good or ill (456d); so, he insisted, the teacher of rhetoric is no more responsible for the abuse of his art than the boxing coach. Socrates, however, got Gorgias to admit that he would teach justice to anyone who came to him not knowing it (459e). Then, insisting that the presence of justice produces just actions and conflating the teaching of justice with the teaching of rhetoric, Socrates led Gorgias into the same contradiction that he notes above. To be fair, this hardly seems Gorgias’ contradiction. If only Gorgias had been more insistent that justice is an additional issue that is not to be confused with rhetoric, it would have been more difficult for Socrates to represent his conflation of justice and rhetoric as Gorgias’ contradiction.

The implication, of course, is that the teacher of rhetoric is responsible for the state of his students’ souls just as the statesman is responsible for the souls of the citizens. The product of his art—the product of his discourse—can then be used as the grounds upon which to judge the teacher. I will return to the question of the relationship between Gorgias’ art (a discursive practice) and the character/ethos of his students shortly. However, first, it is necessary to note the claim with which Socrates brings the historical iteration of his critique of rhetoric to a close.

THE ETHOPOETIC POWER OF DISCOURSE: Anxious & Promising Encounters

The historical iteration of Socrates’ critique (and the conflict that drives the dialogue as a whole) crystallizes when Socrates finally raises himself above the crowd of false claimants and insists upon his nearly exclusive claim to the true political art. “I am one of very few Athenians, not to say the only one, engaged in the true political art, and… of the men of today I alone practice statesmanship. Since I speak… not with a view of winning favor, but I aim at what is best, not what is most pleasant” (521d). The audacity of Socrates’ claim is striking. But it is made more so by the way in which it breaks with Socrates’ usual disavowal of knowledge. It is a rare thing for Socrates to explicitly claim expertise in the Platonic dialogues.

Perhaps the closest parallel that one can find to this is Socrates’ claim in the Symposium to be an expert in erotics (201d). This is a close parallel indeed, and it is a testament to the consistency of Plato’s thought that his protagonist’s rare claims to expertise coincide in the way

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34 Polus and Callicles both point to this concession as what forced Gorgias into contradiction (461b-c, 482d).
that they do. Given the task that Socrates has assigned the political art—to discipline desire, redirecting it towards what is best—his claim on the political art turns out to be synonymous with the claim he makes in the Symposium to be an expert in erotics. The continuity of these claims is further underscored by the fact that when Socrates makes his claim to have a special knowledge of erotics he also gestures toward a connection between his manner of speaking and his erotic practice. As Boyarin has pointed out, Socrates notes that his teacher, Diotima proceeded by means of question and answer, and he breaks with the conventions of eulogy and all the previous speeches of the Symposium when he insists upon reproducing this practice (2007 233).

When Socrates asserts the exclusivity of his claim on the political arts in the Gorgias, he does not mention the methodological distinction that he uses elsewhere to distinguish himself from his competitors. Nevertheless, given the consistency of his concern with method, and the fact that Socrates justifies his claim by the way in which his speech is distinguished from that of others, one should understand the methodological distinction as an essential aspect of Socrates’ art. When he distinguishes his manner of speaking here, what Socrates says, of course, is that it is his objective—his view, his aim—not his mode of speech that distinguishes his speech from that of others. However, throughout the Gorgias, when insisting upon his mode of speech (dialegesthai), Socrates frequently ties his method to the objective of aiming at what is best.

Put slightly differently, Socrates consistently describes his mode of interrogation as aiming to improve the souls of his interlocutors. When forcing Polus to contradict his initial position, for example, Socrates encourages his interlocutor to overcome his discomfort. Taking up the metaphorical terms that he uses to distinguish his political art from rhetoric, Socrates exhorts Polus, “Do not hesitate to answer…. for it will do you no hurt, but submit nobly to the argument as you would to a doctor and say either yes or no to my question” (475d). Socrates characterizes the dialectic as discipline again later, when Callicles withdraws from the discussion. Callicles’ refusal to answer the question is interpreted by Socrates as a refusal of discipline. “This fellow will not put up with being improved and experiencing the very treatment now under discussion, the process of discipline,” Socrates says (505c). Whether Socrates takes up the terms his analogy and likens his questions to medicine or more directly describes his mode of interrogation as discipline, it amounts to the same thing. Socrates uses his claim on the “true” political art to justify the constraints he imposes on his interlocutors and the discomfort he causes them. When Socrates’ interlocutors protest the violence of his behavior and complain about feeling “bound and gagged” by the conditions he imposes, Socrates assures them that it is for their own good. However, given how Socrates rebuffs their questions and refuses to submit his method to the scrutiny that he demands of others, he seems to ask them to take this on faith.

At the same time, Plato, looking over Socrates’ shoulder, invites the reader to understand the dramatizations of the dialectic as Socrates’ attempt to intervene in and reorient the desire of his interlocutors. Being one of the few who engages in—epicheirein, “puts one’s hands to”—the true political art, Socrates offers us a rare glimpse of how such an art is conducted. Thus, Plato invites the reader to reflect not only upon what Socrates says, but also upon what he does. What he does, of course, is preserved in dialogue form, so when Socrates “puts his hand to” his interlocutors, he must be understood as acting through words. In what follows, I want to bring out the performative dimension of Socrates’ practice. Just as the test that Socrates applies the statesmen, sophists and rhetoricians suggests, the task that he sets for himself as the practitioner
of the true political art indicates that his speech has an ethopoetic\textsuperscript{35} quality. The Gorgias suggests that Socrates’ discourse, like those of his rivals, produces a certain ethos or character; the dialectic fosters a certain type of subject. This is why the question of method is always so prominent, because the methodological question is the ethical question. Different modes of discourse are treated as giving rise to different modes of living, as forging different characters.

What are the conditions that endow speech with this ethopoetic potential? In the next three chapters I describe them by examining a series of images that Plato’s Socrates uses to think through the relations between speech, desire and the soul. In particular, I argue that the images of the soul that Plato uses to imagine these relations suggests that speech, desire and the soul exist in a state of intimacy that is fraught with anxiety. This intimacy, on the one hand, is dangerous because it enables speech of another to threaten the health and integrity of the soul. However, it is also the condition that enables the soul to be positively transformed.

In the next chapter, I explore these images, dwelling on the threatening potential they suggest. I argue that the practice of dialectic represents a defensive reaction to the threatening intimacy of speech, which actually seeks to regulate the soul’s exchange with what is outside of itself, minimizing its exposure to foreign logoi. The images that are used to imagine the relation between speech, desire and the soul help motivate the monologism of Socrates’ dialectic. Far from being open to having his own discourse disrupted by alien logoi, Socrates’ dialectic, through the constraints it imposes, seeks to reproduce itself in the other. Thus, it produces a prophylactic space that insulates the philosopher’s soul from the contaminating word of another.

\textsuperscript{35} To avoid confusion, I should clarify that I use the term, ethopoetic, not in its traditional rhetorical sense, as the representation of a character (ethopoiia), but in the productive sense that the Stoics invoke when they speak of ethopoiein as “making ethos, producing ethos, transforming ethos, the individual’s way of being, his mode of existence.” Foucault, Michel. \textit{The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982}. Ed. Frederic Gros. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York, NY: Picador, 2001. (237).
Chapter 2: The Threatening Intimacy of Speech

I. Motivating Monologism – Images of the Soul’s Disturbing Receptivity

In the first chapter, I took issue with the orthodoxy represented by Gonzalez, that the dialectic alone is capable of genuine inquiry, conversation and community. The central crisis of the \textit{Protagoras}, on which Gonzalez bases his claims about the exclusivity of the dialectic’s ability to create a community, I argued, actually preserves the record of a democratic community that Socrates’ methodological imposition disrupts and displaces. Moreover, by examining the central crisis of the \textit{Protagoras} and the perpetual crisis of the \textit{Gorgias}, I argued that accounts such as Gonzalez’s not only elide alternative forms of community, but they also deflect concerns regarding the manner in which the dialectic constrains the inquiry in advance. More particularly, I suggested that Socrates imposes his methodological constraints without allowing the method and its assumptions to come under common scrutiny.

Finally, in partial agreement with Gonzalez (though for different reasons), I suggested that Plato considers the question of method to be ethical in nature; and that the ethical stakes of the discursive situation are what motivates the imposition of the dialectic. As was indicated at the close of the last chapter, by holding sophists, rhetoricians and other claimants of the political art responsible for the states of their students’ souls, the test to which Socrates submits them treats their students as the \textit{product of their speech practices}. Thus, Socrates implies, when it comes to giving form to the student’s soul and endowing the soul with a certain ethos or character, the power \textit{logos} is considerable.

It is precisely this power, the ethopoetic potential of speech, that the next three chapters explore. What, according to Plato, are the conditions that endow speech with this transformative power? In what relationships is speech situated? How can these relations be described, and how do they contribute to the power of logos? How do the Platonic dialogues figure speech? More specifically, the next chapters examine a series of images that recur in Plato’s early and middle dialogues, \textit{Gorgias, Protagoras,} and \textit{Phaedrus,} by which Plato’s text imagines the soul in relation to speech and desire. In these dialogues, when Socrates thinks through the relation between speech and the soul, he repeatedly returns to an image of the soul as a jar (\textit{pithos}) or receptacle (\textit{angeios}). This chapter examines the implications of this image as it pertains to the soul’s relation to \textit{logos}; the next chapter examines a Socratic critique of the role that images play in discussions of the soul, before looking at how the \textit{Phaedrus} uses the same image to figure the subject’s experience of desire; and chapter four examines the \textit{Phaedrus’} much-discussed image of the soul as a chariot. Together, these chapters show that Plato situates the soul in a world of powerful forces—images, words and desires—that threaten its integrity even as they promise to nourish the soul.

My argument is not that Plato has a fully worked out, dogmatic theory regarding the relationship between speech, desire and the soul. Rather, I argue that because speech manifests both therapeutic powers as well as destructive ones, the character-forming power of speech is a source of profound ambivalence in the Platonic dialogues. It is not just that the effect of the discursive encounter is unsure, but the stakes are high. As Socrates tells Hippocrates in the prologue to the \textit{Protagoras}, the question of whether to purchase teachings (\textit{mathemata}) ultimately comes back to “your soul, and… everything concerning whether you do well or ill in your life depends upon whether it becomes worthy or worthless” (313b). What will become of one’s soul? What will become of one’s life? These are indeed high stakes.

Part of the response of the Platonic dialogues to this urgent problem is to develop a set of images that could be used to envision and articulate it. These images help the Plato come to
terms with the transformative power of speech by imagining *logos* in relation to the soul and desire. However, this expression of the problem is not enough to dispel the anxieties that it generates. These images help configure the terms of the problem (speech, desire, and the soul), but they do not in themselves generate the solution.

This chapter and the next argue that Plato’s solution—his attempt to harness the therapeutic potential of speech while guarding against its corrupting influence—is the dialectic. By situating the dialectic in the context of these concerns, I hope to explain why, contrary to conventional wisdom, the dialectic is *not* adopted to ensure an open-ended discussion. Quite the contrary, the dialectic arises out of anxieties over what unguarded exposure to the word of another might entail. Thus, it should not be surprising to see the practice of the dialectic constraining the speech of Socrates’ interlocutors, because it is against too much exposure or openness that the dialectic is meant to guard.

**Plato’s Dialogue with Gorgias**

Before turning to the images that Plato uses to think through the relation between speech, desire and the soul, it is helpful to take a step back in order to look at a key text from which he inherits the problem. That text is Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*. Though Plato uses the *Gorgias* to banish the famed sophist from the realm of philosophy, Plato’s *Phaedrus* is deeply indebted to him. Where the former dialogue only characterizes Gorgias in order to portray him as a charlatan, the latter dialogue does not characterize him at all, so it may seem surprising to claim that the real dialogue between Plato and Gorgias takes place where his name is not even mentioned. (And to the extent that this is true, it lends indirect support to the claim that the dialectic is *not* a practice that is marked by meaningful dialogue). Nevertheless, despite Plato’s effort to portray Gorgias’ enterprise as wholly different from and inferior to his own, as the *Phaedrus* takes up the problem of the subject’s relation to speech and desire it borrows the terms of the problem almost wholesale from Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*. Plato’s response to the subject’s problematic relation to desire and *logos*, of course, will make key departures from that of Gorgias, not the least of which is that he provides a solution that seems to promise escape from the dilemma that Gorgias portrays as intractable. In order to understand how Plato imagines the relations that hold between speech, desire and the soul, and how his conception of dialectic fits into that picture, it is helpful to begin with Gorgias’ definition of the problem.

Susan Jarratt provides an excellent starting point for this discussion. “In the *Encomium of Helen*,” she suggests, “Gorgias engages in… a public exploration of the power of *logos*—a force coming to be seen in the mid-fifth century Greek *polis* as rivaling the fate of the gods or even physical violence in its power.” The strength of Jarratt’s remark is that she not only identifies the main concern of Gorgias’ text, the power of *logos*, but she situates that concern in relation to the first two points of Gorgias’ argument, which consider how the will of the gods (fate) and physical violence attenuate Helen’s agency. It is instructive to compare Jarratt’s approach with that of D.M. MacDowell’s introduction to his translation of *Helen*. “(Gorgias) comes to the question: why did Helen go to Troy? He says that four causes are possible: Chance and the gods; force; persuasive speech; love. He discusses each of the four in turn… and argues that each is a mighty power, so that Helen should not be blamed for submitting to it” (12). MacDowell’s summary closely approximates Gorgias’ own overview of his argument: Helen went with Alexander, either “because of the wishes of Chance and the purposes of the gods… because she was seized by force, or persuaded by speech, <or captivated by love>“ (6). In any

case, Gorgias argues, “the responsibility (ten aitian) is to be attributed” to someone or something else, and “Helen is to be released from infamy” (6). Obviously, MacDowell is not wrong, but he does much less to clarify the relation between different elements of Gorgias’ argument than Jarratt. In fact, the literalism of MacDowell’s summation encourages his reader to sequester the different parts of Gorgias’ argument from one another. This tendency is at work as MacDowell continues, “It is possible to agree that Helen… must have been subject to at least one of the four influences listed. (One may disbelieve in one or two of them; nor are they mutually exclusive; but neither of these facts affects the validity of Gorgias’ argument)” (12). In terms of the argument over Helen’s guilt, I have no objection to MacDowell. However, one can get more out of the text by reading it, as Jarratt does, as a whole of interrelated parts which inform and complicate one another, the significance of which extends beyond the case of Helen.

My reading of Gorgias follows Jarratt in prioritizing his discussion of logos. However, I also say more to relate his treatment of the power of logos to the other constraints on the subject’s agency that he describes, especially eros, which Jarratt largely neglects. Further, I try to show how the whole discussion of speech, desire and agency arises out of, and reflects on the speech situation that Gorgias and his audience inhabit. In particular, I argue, Gorgias’ opening reflection on the encomiastic speech situation poses the question of what makes something praise- or blameworthy. This leads him into a consideration the issue of causation, responsibility and agency—concepts embraced by the Greek term, aitios. Gorgias complicates the possibility of the subject’s agency (aitios), first by exploring more obvious impingements on one’s agency (fate and violence), then by considering the more subtle, but nonetheless powerful forces of logos and eros. Boyarin describes the significance of the parallel between logos and violence, “The dilemma that (Gorgias) raises, is whether or not there is truly something called persuasion that is different from force, whether or not, that is, there can be a rhetoric that nonetheless leaves its recipient free to choose between different positions and thus subject to moral and criminal judgment” (67). My reading agrees with Boyarin’s, but pushes the issue further. On the one hand, I draw out how the issue of aitios or responsibility gets further complicated as it is refracted through the logoi of a tradition that exceeds boundaries of any given discursive situation. That is to say, I want to emphasize how the force of logoi not only moves from speaker to audience (i.e., from Alexander to Helen or Gorgias to his audience), but acts upon the speaker as well. The speaker also having been a listener is not immune to the action of foreign logoi. On the other hand, I provide a fuller characterization of how desire fits into this picture.

Gorgias is not alone in his depiction of eros as a force that overcomes the subject from without, bending him to its will. There existed, at the time, a tradition for this representation of Eros as both god and invading force in the work of the lyric poets. The lyric poets posit a whole “physiology” to articulate the subject’s vulnerability to invasion by eros. Anne Carson describes some of their favorite metaphors, “Alongside melting we cite metaphors of piercing, crushing, bridling, roasting, stinging, biting, grating, cropping, poisoning, singeing and grinding to powder, all of which are used of eros by the poets, giving a cumulative impression of intense concern for the integrity and control of one’s own body.″ Gorgias not only reproduces this tradition’s emphasis on invasion and violence, sharing its concern over the threat eros poses to the subject, but he yokes the problem of eros to that of logos. Thus, we find Gorgias’ description of logos borrowing metaphors, such as “poisoning” (pharmakon) from the poets’ treatment of

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37 Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon defines aitios as blameworthy, culpable, the accused; being the cause, responsible for, the cause (24).

eros as he describes the convergent experiences of both. He describes logos and eros as invading the subject from without, as compelling obedience, and underscores their resemblance to more conventionally recognizable forms of compulsion (violence and fate). Of course, in the Phaedrus, Plato also borrows from the lyric tradition as well. Socrates even cites Sappho. But the yoking together and interpenetration of these two forms of compulsion—eros and logos—he seems to take from Gorgias.

Logoi & Pragma: Understanding the Pragmatic Power of Logos

Gorgias begins his Encomium of Helen by reflecting on the demands of the genre. Encomia are speeches of praise, so Gorgias reflects on the criteria that should be used to when conferring praise or blame on different objects of speech. “The grace (kosmos) of a city is excellence of its men, of a body beauty, of a mind wisdom, of an action virtue, of speech truth; the opposites of these are a disgrace” (1). In the next sentence, Gorgias goes on to elaborate what this means for the author of an encomium. “A man, a woman, a speech (logon), a deed (ergon), a city, and an action (pragma),” he tells us, “if deserving of praise, one should honour with praise, but to the undeserving one should attach blame” (1). The gesture of reflecting on the demands of the speech situation at the start of a speech is common in Greek oratory. In the funeral oration of Thucydides’ Pericles, for instance, Pericles reflects not only on the custom of speaking over the dead, but he even discusses the custom of reflecting on the speech situation. In another famous Encomium of Helen, Isocrates also makes this gesture. First, Isocrates condemns “(those) who think it a great thing if they put forward an odd, paradoxical theme and can discuss it without giving offense” (1). Then, Isocrates faults Gorgias’ Helen for failing to fulfill the demands of encomia. Separating him from those who indulge in unworthy themes, Isocrates says, “I praise the man who has written about Helen because he has recalled a woman of such quality…. However, a small point escaped him. He says he has written an encomium about her, but he has actually spoken a defense (apologia) for what she did” (14). Isocrates’ objection is apt. Insofar as he poses the question of causation and responsibility, Gorgias transforms his encomium from a simple act of praise to an investigation of the conditions that make something or someone praiseworthy. Without wholly abandoning the intentions of encomia, then, Gorgias manages to transform it. As a result, his encomium retains many features that are typical of the genre. The list of possible objects of praise, men, women, bodies, souls, actions, deeds and cities are fairly typical objects of encomia. Gorgias’ initial foray into the subject of Helen is also typical in its formulaic praise of her “godlike beauty,” of her paternity, and of her reputation (3-5). However, Gorgias quickly brackets this approach to return to his investigation of Helen’s agency, and so, he again strays from the traditional terrain of encomia.

Gorgias prepares this investigation from the start of his speech, not only by shifting the question of his encomium, but also by developing a parallel between speech and the object of speech, which will insist on the pragmatic quality of logos. Gorgias consistently places logos side by side what it speaks about and passes judgment on, as something that should itself be spoken about and judged. Understanding speech as he understands deeds and actions (erga and pragma), Gorgias portrays logos as having an irreducibly pragmatic quality. Speech, like men

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39 “Many of those who have spoken here in the past have praised the institution of this speech at the close of our ceremony…. I do not agree…. Our belief in the courage and manliness of so many should not be hazarded on the goodness or badness of one man’s speech” (Thucydides 2.35). Pericles then goes on to draw out how the occasion shapes the task of the speaker. Plato’s Socratic parody of Pericles’ funeral oration also follows suit. “Noble words are a memorial and a crown given to the doers (of noble deeds) by the hearers.” Socrates says, before asking “What sort of word will this be, and how shall we rightly begin the praises of brave men?” (Menexenus 236d-e).
and cities, like actions and deeds, inevitably produces some effect in the world, which ought to be subject to judgment as much as any non-linguistic act. Gorgias’ portrayal of the effect of persuasion as akin to “the violence of violators” attests to this (12). The result is that Gorgias’ imperative that “one should honour with praise… (or) attach blame” to the praiseworthy and blameworthy not only describes the relationship between a speech and its object, it simultaneously demands that a speech take other speeches as one of its objects. In itself, this may not seem like a radical demand. Indeed, Gorgias seems to formalize the demand that is implicitly heeded when orators like Isocrates, Pericles and himself situate their speeches with respect to others. However, within a speech about how speech attenuates the subject’s agency and responsibility, the stress that Gorgias lays on the inevitable relationship between logoi and their practical outcomes should be understood to emphasize how the history that is embedded in logoi inevitably shapes one’s position as a listener (akousanton), a speaker and an agent.

Not surprisingly, it is just this problem, the problem of one’s relation as a speaker to others that have come before—the problem of authorship, responsibility, and agency—that occupy the rest of Gorgias’ text. At the same time that Gorgias introduces the ostensible topic of his discourse—Helen, and the question of her praise- or blameworthiness—he situates his logos in a whole hermeneutic tradition that surrounds her. “The man who says rightly what ought to be said,” Gorgias says, “should also refute those who blame Helen, a woman about whom both the belief of those who have listened to the poets and the message of her name, which has become a reminder of the calamities, have been in unison and unanimity” (2). Gorgias not only situates his own discourse with respect to other discourses about Helen, insisting that he must “refute those who blame Helen,” but he extends the parallelism between speech and its object by raising the same question about those other discourses as he does about Helen herself. As he assesses Helen’s praise- or blameworthiness, Gorgias also asks about the praise- or blameworthiness of the discourses about her.

This is why at the same time that Helen is identified as the object of Gorgias’ discourse, she is almost eclipsed by his concern with the logoi that have circulated about her. Conferring blame upon those who have maligned Helen is a task of equal importance to Gorgias’ speech as conferring praise upon Helen herself. So, as the final sentence of the prologue describes the purpose of his encomium, it oscillates back and forth, at times addressing his concern with Helen, at times addressing the discourses about her. “I wish, by adding some reasoning to my speech,” Gorgias says, “to free (pausai) the slandered woman from accusation and to demonstrate (epideixai) that those who blame her are lying, and both to show (deixai) what is true and to put a stop (pausai) to their ignorance” (2). Typical of the style that made him famous, the concluding sentence of his prologue balances two dependent clauses, both of which consist of opposed infinitive phrases, against one another. Within both clauses, the object of each infinitive shifts back and forth, directing the attention of his audience from Helen to her accusers back to Helen and to her accusers again. In this formulation, Gorgias seems to restate the purpose of his speech four times: to free Helen from blame, to blame her accusers, to tell the truth (about Helen), and to free her accusers from their ignorance. This may seem unnecessarily redundant, but it allows Gorgias to complicate the relationship between these tasks. In fact, the sequence of infinitives—pausai (to end/free), (epi)deixai (to expose), deixai (to expose), pausai (to end)—forms a chiasmus, which complicates Gorgias’ relationship to Helen and his rival

40 In contemporary terms, one might say that for Gorgias speech is “performative.” It is a way of doing something. See J. L. Austin’s discussion of the performative in How to Do Things With Words, 2nd Ed. Eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975. 4-11.
speakers by attaching the same pair of verbs to each of them. This will mark a significant shift in Gorgias’ attitude towards the traditional discourses about Helen. In the first clause Gorgias pits himself against “those who blame her.” He seeks to end the accusations about Helen and to expose those who have slandered her. Calling them liars, Gorgias accuses Helen’s accusers. In the second clause, however, he appears less antagonistic. Rather than exposing the lies of his rivals, he seeks to expose the truth about Helen and to end his rivals’ ignorance. As Gorgias seeks to end the unfortunate condition of his rivals, the blame that the first clause attaches to their false speech seems to drop out so that rather than attacking them, Gorgias appears to be coming to their aid. Thus, Gorgias takes up a relation with his rivals similar to his relation with Helen; as he frees Helen from her ignominy, he frees her accusers from their ignorance.

The parallel between Gorgias’ relationship to Helen and to her accusers, however, is even tighter than this. It is not just that Gorgias assumes an attitude toward his rivals that bears some resemblance to the benevolence he shows to Helen. Rather, even as Gorgias accuses Helen’s accusers, the same argument that he uses to defend her will attenuate blame that his speech is obliged to attach to them. Gorgias frees Helen’s accusers from blame on the basis of the most famous argument that he mounts in Helen’s defense; the persuader—Alexander and the tradition that Helen’s critics have listened to—is guilty of injustice, not Helen and not her critics.

Powerless Against Logos: A Defense of Helen, a Defense of her Accusers

The third and most important defense of Helen that Gorgias mounts is cast in terms that, on the one hand, recall the first two and, on the other hand, anticipate the fourth (eros). “Speech is a powerful ruler (dunastes megas)” (8), Gorgias writes, identifying it with the gods, whose rule, the first defense asserts, “(humans are) powerless to resist (adunaton koluein) (6). “Its substance is minute and invisible,” he continues, “but its deeds are most divine (theiotatos erga)” (8). I have departed from MacDowell’s translation on a couple of points in order to bring out the lexical (and conceptual) continuity of the first and third arguments. In each case, as with the suggestion that Helen was subject to physical force, Gorgias’ defense of Helen concerns power (dunamis). Gorgias pits the powerful gods against a powerless woman in anticipation of pitting logos, another powerful lord, against the same, powerless woman.

While the initial characterization of logos implicitly draws the analogy between its power and that of the gods by deploying the same terms for both, the conclusion that Gorgias draws from it directly invokes the second defense. “[If] Helen… (had come) under the influence of speech,” Gorgias argues, then her actions were “just as much against her will as if she had been seized by violence of violators (hosper ei biaterion bia harpasthe)” (12). Whereas the analogy between the power of the gods (dunamis) and the power of logos emphasizes the overwhelming force of logos (and perhaps also hints at the immortality of this substance, whose life, like the stories about Helen, stretches across generations), the parallel between the force of logos and that of violence testifies to the visceral consequence of speech. Logos engenders violence (bia). Logos has the effect of “seizing one,” “carrying one off” in the manner of the Harpes (harpazdo). Gorgias does not shy away from drawing more general conclusions.

Speaking in language that is abstract from the specifics of Helen’s case, Gorgias underscores the intimacy of this violence. Though logos comes to the subject from elsewhere, seizing one from without, its impulse becomes indistinguishable from will of the subject. “Persuasion, though not having an appearance of compulsion (anangke) has the same power (ten de dunamin ten auten). For speech, the persuader,” Gorgias continues, “compelled mind, the persuaded, both to obey what was said and to approve what was done” (12, my emphasis). The last pair of verbal phrases—to obey what was said (kai peithesthai tois legominous) and to
approve what was done (kai sunainesai tois poioumenois)—is especially interesting for two reasons.

On the one hand, the characterization of Helen as simultaneously obeying and approving—as being compelled and willing the same act—anticipates Gorgias’ treatment of eros. Specifically, the suggestion that one can desire to do what one is compelled to do—that one can approve of what is against one’s will—indicates that desire provides no easy way of distinguishing between coercive and non-coercive situations. One may approve of what is done; one may desire it and even take pleasure in it, but that does not mean that one is any less subject to what the final defense calls “(the) compulsions of love” (19, erotos anangkais). Here Helen provides an image of a violated subject, who experiences external compulsion as her own desire, though without undoing the distinction between the two. This coincidence of compulsion and desire, which is exactly what the logos and eros-defenses of Helen describe, defies any attempt to provide an easy answer to the question of aitios. How can one be described as responsible, as a cause, an agent without first distinguishing between compulsion and desire?

On the other hand, this pairing of verbs also creates an especially poignant moment of self-reflexivity. The second verb, “to approve” (sunaineo)—through which external and internal, compulsion and desire, become blurred—literally means “to join in praising” (LSJ 766). Thus, the verb that describes this breakdown also describes what Gorgias would have his audience do. Gorgias’ goal is to get his audience to join him in praising Helen. Of course, as one delivering an encomium, his goal is not unique. The goal is a part of the speech situation. But that is the point, the same verb, sunaineo, that describes Alexander’s covert exercise of power over Helen, his shaping of her desire, also describes the structure and end of the speech situation that Gorgias and his audience inhabit. Sunaineo does double duty here. It describes the course of desire, which approves of certain objects and actions, and it describes the speaker’s effect on his audience—his ability to compel his audience to join him in singing someone’s or something’s praises. That is to say, sunaineo marks the convergence of eros and logos, by describing the course of the eros and the effect of logos. I will return this coupling desire and discourse shortly, but first more needs to be said about the self-reflexivity of the speech.

HELEN AS MIRROR: Reflecting on the Situation & Limits of the Speaking Subject

Gorgias not only describes Alexander’s/the persuader’s, attempt to win Helen’s approval as an act of compulsion; he marks the convergence of the experience of persuasion with those of physical violence, subjection to the will of the gods, and desire. Moreover, Gorgias implicates himself as one who, like Alexander, occupies a position of power over his audience. Drawing a parallel between his relation to his audience and Alexander’s relation to Helen, Gorgias makes it clear that he not only seeks to compel his audience, but he also seeks to elicit his audience’s desire and approval (sunaineo).

Gorgias’ reflection on the power of logos is frequently taken as commenting on his relation as an orator to his audience. The argument clearly invites Gorgias’ audience to compare their positions as auditors to Helen’s. This much is undeniable, but what exactly to make of this relationship is subject to dispute. Many, under the influence of Platonic and Aristotelian understandings of rhetoric, are inclined to see Helen as an advertisement for the skill set that Gorgias is selling. They take him to be flexing his rhetorical muscle as a way of indicating the power that a speaker gains over his audience through the study of rhetoric. Of course, it is not

41 MacDowell stops short of this characterization, but doubting “whether the Encomium of Helen ought to be called a work of philosophy,” he speculates that “Gorgias enjoys showing off his rhetorical skill in defending conduct which is really indefensible” (16). It is a short step from this understanding of Gorgias’ demonstration of skill to the
inappropriate to understand Gorgias as dramatizing the power that a speaker exercises over his audience, but there are more interesting interpretive directions to take it. For instance, Susan Jarratt describes Gorgias’ depiction of the power of persuasion as arising out of the ethical concerns of an expert in persuasion. Making this exploration of the power of logos public, Jarratt argues, Gorgias, who cultivates that power, “escape(s) the accusation of amoral manipulation… (by) bring(ing) the conditions under which persuasion (is) effected before the audience itself as subject for consideration” (57). The point, of course, is not just that Gorgias negotiates his public persona (defending his art against charges of manipulation), but that Helen indicates a deeply disturbing inability to distinguish social situations that involve coercion from those that do not. Indeed, what Jarratt and those who understand Gorgias as a cynical wielder of power have in common is that they understand Gorgias’ relation to his audience as deeply problematic. It is not my intention to deny this, but it is important to situate this relationship in a wider context.

The problematization of the speaker/audience relation needs to be understood as commenting on the entire tradition of commentary on Helen, and by extension, on the manner in which traditions reproduce themselves through logos. Gorgias’ relationship with his audience is, of course, a part of this tradition, but one must not lose sight of the larger context. Indeed, Gorgias’ speech makes no sense without it. This is why, from the start of the text, Gorgias expresses just as much concern about rival speakers and discourses as he does about Helen herself. Gorgias problematizes the larger tradition of commentary by examining the speech situation that reproduces it. In fact, Helen appears to have been selected as the object of this encomium for her capacity to act as a mirror that can facilitate Gorgias’ reflection on the speech situation itself. By examining Helen’s situation, Gorgias is able to attribute to the logos that reproduces a tradition such an awesome power that it not only attenuates the agency of its audience—its ability to act as a cause, to be responsible, to be an aitia—but the power of logos also effects a blurring of the distinction between speaker and audience. Though Gorgias seems to elevate the speaker to an unconditional dominance over his audience, he shows that this position is illusory and is ultimately undercut by the speaking subject’s place within history.

The sheer force of logos falls back on the speaker too, undercutting his agency in similar fashion. In his commentary on the tradition of blaming Helen, Gorgias draws our attention to the shifting positions of every speaker/listener in order to show how the logoi that one inherits—in terms of vocabulary and in terms of the stories one hears—subjects one to the force of tradition, shaping one’s position as a speaker and an agent. Gorgias does not make this point specifically within the defense of Helen. However, in the prologue, when he recognizes that the encomium demands that he “refute those who blame Helen,” he ties the lies of rival speakers back to what they have heard. “The belief of those who have listened (ton… akousanton) to the poets and the message of her name, which has become a reminder of the calamities,” Gorgias says, “have been in unison and unanimity” (2). When Gorgias traces the source of the error of those who blame Helen back to the poets and to the “message of her name” (punning on the similarity of her name, Helenen, and helein, meaning ‘destroy’42), the implications are not yet clear. However,

commonplace understanding that reduces the significance of the speech to its advertising value. Andy Crockett also briefly entertains this possibility. “Perhaps Gorgias was simply being a showman. If I can do this for the most guilty, he was saying in effect, imagine what I can do for you!” (84). Crockett, Andy. “Gorgias’s Encomium of Helen: Violent Rhetoric or Radical Feminism?” Rhetoric Review 13.1 (1994): 71-91. Unlike MacDowell, however, Crockett understands Gorgias as raising more substantial questions. I wonder to what extent the categorization of Gorgias’ work as philosophical or rhetorical shapes MacDowell’s willingness to open the question guilt.

42 MacDowell 29.
retrospectively we understand “those who have listened to the poets” as those who have been persuaded and compelled by the poets. So, from the start, Gorgias underscores the passivity of his rival speakers by emphasizing their role, first as listeners, whose subsequent speech reproduces the tradition of discourse that has acted upon and through them.

This passivity is embodied in the figure of Helen, who, whether carried off by fate, violence or the speech of another did not leave on her own accord. Thus, we find, the demands of the encomium put Gorgias in an impossible situation. The encomium demands that Gorgias “attach blame” to “the undeserving,” which means that he must blame those who have blamed Helen. However, the truth of Helen’s situation, if she was subjected to the power of logos not only exonerates her, but it also exonerates those who blame her, for they too have been subjected to the force of persuasion. So, even as he accuses his rivals, Gorgias mounts their defense.

Holding Helen up as a mirror of the situation inhabited by those who discourse about her, Gorgias shows just how complicated the situation is. Just as Helen’s actions are not her “own,” because the influence of another’s logos caused her to act against her will, so it is with Gorgias’ rivals. They too are the victims of another’s discourse. They are victims of the discourses that have preceded them. Thus, the power dynamic that takes place between Alexander and Helen, gets refracted through a myriad of disparate voices that enjoin Gorgias and his rivals and his audience to blame Helen for the calamitous war.

These voices and interpretations inevitably precede and shape one’s “own” position as a speaker. This is why Gorgias’ prologue gives equal weight to his concern with Helen as to his concern with his rivals. What Gorgias shows is that the subject’s relation to an object, whether it is an object of speech or an object of desire, never occurs in isolation. The subject always inhabits a position—a relation to its object—that is informed by a backdrop of past voices and the relationships they have already articulated.

The use of a woman as a figure to explore the limits of agency is significant. Ann L. T. Bergren describes Helen as embodying the fundamental ambiguity of women for a phallocratic culture.43 Traditional stories about Helen stress her status as an object (an object of desire, an object of exchange). At the same time, however, they portray her as one who seduces, as one who speaks—choosing her husband (Menalaus), perhaps also choosing her suitor (Alexander). Thus, she exercises the power of a subject. Bergren argues that Gorgias reasserts the ideology of a phallocratic culture by eliminating her ambiguity as a subject/object and reducing her to pure objecthood (82-86). Andy Crocket makes a similar claim when he suggests that Gorgias reinscribes Helen’s victimhood. “Making Helen a victim,” Crocket claims, “perpetuates violence: it inscribes violence by designating or eliminating the social roles of victim/Helen and victimizer/Paris…. Gorgias seems to be arguing that a woman’s sexuality is a priori subject to control by a system of rhetoric already in place when she is born…. However, he fails to encourage a critique of violence” (Crocket 87). Both Bergren and Crocket offer interesting analyses of Helen, but neither does enough to account for how Gorgias’ treatment of her plight provides a reflection of his own attenuated position as a speaker. Rather than eliminating Helen’s ambiguity, Gorgias shows how one’s position as a speaker and subject is always, like Helen’s, ambiguous and compromised. Rather than shoring up his subjecthood by making Helen a pure object, Gorgias shows what Helen’s situation exposes about one’s own.

**GORGIAN PHARMACOLOGY: The Complementarity of Eros & Logos**

Joining the machinations of desire to the rhetorical situation, Gorgias indicates that desire does not take place in a vacuum. Desire never belongs exclusively to the subject who

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experiences it. Rather, it always has a social inflection that is never free of compulsion. That is not to say that desire is exclusively a linguistic concern or that it is only carried by the word of another, though the case of Helen suggests *logos* does act as an imperative to join with others in desiring and approving. The suggestion seems to be that desire, like *logos*, comes “to order… the mind” from without (14, *tou logou dunamis pros ten tes psyches taxin*). Gorgias provides a complicated account of the interpenetrated workings of *logos* and *eros*. Emphasizing the passivity of the subject who experiences them, Gorgias describes each as inducing fear, sorrow and pleasure (9-10, 14; 16,18). The parallelism between *logos* and *eros* is complicated by their interaction. This has already been hinted at in Gorgias’ use of the verb *sunaineo* to mark the convergence of the subject’s experience of *logos* and *eros*; desire not only appears as the effect of discourse, but it becomes manifest in speech, in praise, approving (*sunaineo*) of an object.

The metaphors that dominate the conclusion of Gorgias’ reflection on the power of *logos* and his treatment *eros* again pick up on this interaction. “The power of speech,” Gorgias says, picking up a metaphor that the lyric poets applied to *eros*, “bears the same relation to the ordering of the mind as the ordering of drugs (*ton pharmakon*) bears to the constitution of bodies” (14). Gorgias, like Plato after him, exploits the full ambivalence of this metaphor. “Just as different drugs expel different humours from the body, and some stop it from being ill and others stop it from living, so too some speeches cause sorrow, some cause pleasure, some cause fear… some drug and bewitch the mind with an evil persuasion” (14). Coupled with the metaphor of *logos* as *pharmakon* is the metaphor that dominates the end of *Helen*. *Eros* is a disease. Confirming the diagnosis of the lyric poets, Gorgias describes how the body and soul become vulnerable to this pathology. Focusing on vision, the medium by which *eros* reaches the soul, Gorgias describes *eros* as a disease that is transmitted through the eye: the sight of frightful things throw many into “groundless distress and terrible illness and incurable madness” (17, my emphasis); art provides “a pleasant disease for the eyes” (18); but as is the case with the beauty that inspires *eros*, a “pleasant disease” can easily take a sinister turn. In Helen’s case, the otherwise benign pleasure that a desirable object (Alexander) provides the eye, “transmitted an eagerness and striving of love to her mind,” which, overcoming her, carried her off to her infamous fate (19). In this case, then, Gorgias insists, love can only be described as “a human malady and incapacity of mind” (19). It is worth noting that the disease metaphor is attributed a range of meanings that gives it an ambivalence similar to the *pharmakon* metaphor. That is to say, the effect of *eros* can be relatively harmless or devastating, but like *logos*, it inspires fear, pleasure and other emotions as it traverses the boundaries of the subject.

*Logos* and *Eros*, Medicine and Disease: It is interesting that these two forces—*logos* and *eros*—that act upon the subject appear so similar in their mechanics and, at times seem to converge in their effect, while simultaneously being opposed to one another (as medicine is to disease). Why are *eros* and *logos* so closely paired? The desire-as-disease metaphor completes the *logos*-as-*pharmakon* metaphor. Indeed, insofar as *logos* orders the mind, it does so through desire. Ordering the subject’s relations—to Alexander, for instance, or to Helen (in the case of Gorgias’ audience)—by “transmit(ting) an eagerness and striving” towards different objects; *logos* does its work through *eros*. Thus, we find that at the same time that *logos* appears capable of changing the course of desire, it also depends on *eros* to be effective. This means that the “cure”—*logos, the pharmakon*—will share the same characteristic that makes desire, the disease, so dangerous. In particular, it means that *logos*, like *eros*, is a force that comes to one from without, subjecting the *psyche* to a foreign order.
This pairing of *eros* and *logos*, discourse and desire, will reappear in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. A key difference, however, is that where Gorgias insists on the history of *logos*—on its inescapably historical and social limitations—Plato will gesture towards a desire and discourse that escape social origins. For Plato, this discourse, which is removed from the contingencies of time, promises to remove the subject from time as well. This discourse is the dialectic, and it promises to restore the subject to himself by recapturing an original and originary desire. Thus, the discourse that Plato uses to define philosophy will retain the *pharmakon’s* promise of transformation, but its cathartic and prophylactic qualities will come to dominate its work, as it acts to buffer the philosophical subject from external forces.

II. UNTYING THE GORGIAN KNOT

*Platonic Prophylactics: Guarding the Soul With/Against Logos & Eros*

In *Protagoras* and *Phaedrus*, Plato picks up Gorgias’ problem—specifically, that *logos* and *eros* are experienced as invading forces—and gives it more concrete contours by attaching it to an image of the soul. Describing the soul as a sort of “receptacle” (*angeion*) these dialogues use this image to stress the soul’s vulnerability to what lies outside of it. Like Gorgias, Plato will emphasize the strength and violence of forces that pierce the borders of the soul, undermine its boundaries and call its identity into question. Like Gorgias too, Plato will trace the analogous routes of speech (*logos*) and beauty (image and desire) through the subject. Figuring the soul in this manner, Socrates describes the way in which speech, images and desire flow like liquid through the soul, shifting it to and fro and reorienting it as they traverse it. For these dialogues, as for Gorgias, speech is a special concern. While the *Phaedrus* follows Helen in marking the converging effects of speech, images and desire, it pays special heed to the effect of *logos*. *Logos* is described as entering into the soul and inhabiting it—or, in more ominous terms, Socrates will describe the soul as being possessed or drugged (*katapharmakeuthentos*) by word of another (*Phaedrus* 242e). Of course, as a *pharmakon*, *logos* continues to play an ambivalent role, because just as it can undermine the health of the soul, it can also rehabilitate it.

These dialogues are not alone in figuring the soul in this manner. For instance, though the *Cratylus* does not explicitly invoke the same terms for the soul, in it Socrates will use the same verbs to describe his relationship to another’s speech (396e). In chapter three, I will examine how Socrates puts the same analogy to use in the *Gorgias* as well. However, the rest of this chapter focuses on the iterations of the soul-as-receptacle analogy in *Protagoras* and *Phaedrus*, because each of them is prominently featured and each functions in a similar way within its context. It is important to note, in particular, that each use of this image frames and comments upon another portion of the text. For instance, in the prologue of the *Protagoras* this analogy will be used to shape and motivate the manner in which Socrates and Hippocrates approach Protagoras in the main portion of the text (314a-b); and in the *Phaedrus* Socrates’ use of the analogy will frame his speech in praise of the non-lover (235d, 243d).

*Logos in the Protagoras: Promises of Nourishment & Threats of Contamination*

Before Socrates and Hippocrates visit Protagoras in the dialogue named for him, Plato uses the opening discussion as a way of framing the main portion of the dialogue. This forms a

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44 Describing the parallels between *Cratylus* and *Phaedrus*, Andrea Wilson Nightingale points out that both dialogues deal with Socrates’ relation to the speech of another, both describe Socrates as having been “filled up” (*peplerosthai*), and both describe a need for Socrates to “purify” (*kathairein*) himself afterwards (234). Nightingale, Andrea Wilson. “Subtext and Subterfuge in Plato’s Cratylus.” *Plato as Author: The Rhetoric of Philosophy*. Ed. Ann N. Michelini. Boston: Brill, 2003. 223-240.
prologue to the dialogue’s main action (310a-314e), in which Plato emphasizes the primary concern that motivates Socrates to engage Protagoras on Hippocrates’ behalf.

The discussion begins at Socrates’ home just before dawn, when an excited Hippocrates rouses him from sleep so that Socrates can act as his envoy, introducing him to Protagoras. In an attempt to counter Hippocrates’ obvious excitement, Socrates uses the early hour as an excuse to delay the visit long enough to question his interlocutor regarding his intentions (311a). After establishing Hippocrates’ desire to enlist himself amongst the students of Protagoras, Socrates asks him, “Now whom do you think you are going to, and what will he make of you” (311b). More specifically, the second question reads “tis genesomenos.” Using the middle, future participle of gignomai, “to become,” it might also be rendered “what will become of you?” Though the latter translation is a bit vague, it does well to indicate the broad scope of the question. When Socrates asks Hippocrates this question, he indicates that the encounter with Protagoras will shape the quality of Hippocrates’ existence as a whole. In the broadest of terms, Socrates suggests, this encounter will determine what will become of Hippocrates. This issue will become more tangible by the end of the prologue when Socrates describes the possible consequences of his association with Protagoras in terms of the welfare of his soul.

In the meantime, however, having only obliquely raised the issue, Socrates finds it necessary to guide his interlocutor’s attempt to answer the question of what will become of him. Socrates does so by proposing the following analogy: If Hippocrates were to pay a fee to study with his namesake, Hippocrates of Cos, what would he become? He would become doctor (311c). If he were to study with a sculptor, he would become a sculptor. So then, what is Protagoras and what would he make of Hippocrates? The analogy obliges Hippocrates to answer that because Protagoras is a sophist, he too would become a sophist. The answer however, makes Hippocrates blush, and Socrates takes a moment to dwell on this reaction. “But wouldn’t a man like you be ashamed… to face your fellow country men as a Sophist,” he asks, forcing Hippocrates to acknowledge his shame (312a).

At this point, Socrates acknowledges the limits of the analogy and provides Hippocrates with a more promising alternative. Perhaps one studies with Protagoras, Socrates speculates, not as one studies a techne (to become craftsman), but to gain the sort of “liberal education” (paideia) that “a layman and a gentleman” ought to have (312b). Hippocrates gladly embraces this alternative, but Socrates quickly renders the status of this type of education problematic as well. Invoking aristocratic and xenophobic suspicions of the sophists, Socrates lends his concern an added urgency. “You are going to entrust the care of your soul (ten psychen ten sautou… therapeuasai) to a man who is, in your own words, a Sophist, though I should be surprised if you know just what a Sophist is. And yet if you don’t know that, you don’t know to whom you are entrusting your soul (paradidos ten psyche) nor whether he represents something good or bad” (312c). Socrates does not yet call for a definition of this type of paideia as he will in a moment; nor does question the very existence of this type of education as he does later in the dialogue (319d). Rather, granting for the moment that such paideia exists, Socrates treats this type of education as a sort of “care for the soul.” The displacement of his initial conception of education as technical instruction by education as paideia (or a sort of enculturation and cultivation of the soul) raises the stakes of Hippocrates’ desire to study with Protagoras. The range of possible answers to the question of “what he will make of you” no longer consists of a set of professional identities (a doctor, a sculptor, and so on), but instead assumes a deeper significance. I do not mean to imply that paideia is a Platonic invention. Far from it, as Werner Jaeger’s classic study
has shown that *paideia* was a practice that was widely disseminated in Greek culture.\(^45\) To the extent that Jaeger is right, he illustrates how Socrates’ *techne* analogy artificially restricts the range of possible answers to the question of what Hippocrates wants out of a sophistic education. If the type of education that he seeks is one that will nurture his soul, then the question, *tis genesomenos*, simply cannot be answered in the way the analogy suggests. Rather, the question takes on overtly existential or ethical dimensions. It becomes a question of what type of man you will become. What *ethos* you will develop and carry with you through life?

However, while the introduction of *paideia* enables Socrates to broaden the scope of his concern beyond the constraints that his *techne* analogy imposes, Patrick Coby points out that his further questions about the nature of the sophistic undo the distinction between a technical education and *paideia*.\(^46\) After Hippocrates defines the sophistic as “one who has knowledge of wise things” (212c), Socrates again frames his questions using the *techne* analogy. “One could say the same,” Socrates says, “of painters and builders, that they are those who have knowledge of wise things. But if we were asked what sort of wisdom painters understand, we should reply, wisdom concerned with the making of likenesses, and so on with others” (212c-d). When asked what the sophistic’s knowledge concerns or what he makes, Hippocrates replies, “he is master of the art of making clever speakers” (312d). As soon as he answers the question, of course, Hippocrates already acquiesces to Socrates’ demand that Protagorean *paideia* be understood in terms of a productive art (*techne*). Having invoked the concept of *paideia* just long enough to indicate the ethical stakes of Hippocrates’ desire, Socrates then forecloses the possibility of this type of education. He insists that the answer, “he makes clever speakers,” be specified, so as to name the subject about which the sophistic will make one a clever speaker (312d-e). Hippocrates proves unable to either discern the linguistic object of sophistic/rhetorical knowledge (that its proper subject is speech itself) or to provide an alternative subject (e.g., justice) as Protagoras later does; so he is left without a response.

Ashamed once again, Hippocrates admits his ignorance regarding what a sophistic is and what he teaches (312e). Unlike the previous moment when Hippocrates blushed however, Coby points out that this time Socrates, “does nothing to allay his shame” (30). Rather, Socrates launches into a sharp and lengthy rebuke of his young interlocutor’s unbridled enthusiasm. “Do you realize the sort of danger (*kindunon*) to which you are going to expose your soul?” he asks:

> If it were a case of putting your body into the hands of someone and risking (*diakinduneuonta*) the treatment’s turning out beneficial or the reverse, you would ponder deeply…. But when it comes to something which you value more highly than your body, namely your soul—something on whose beneficial or harmful treatment your whole welfare depends—you have not consulted either your father or your brother or any of us who are your friends on the question of whether or not to entrust your soul to this stranger who has arrived among us…. Here you come at dawn, not to discuss or consult me on this question… but ready… to put yourself into his hands. (313a-c)

Looking back over their discussion from the moment that Hippocrates appeared at his door, Socrates’ rebuke traces the conflict has animated the prologue. From the start, Socrates had recognized his companion’s “fighting spirit and… excitement,” and that prompted him to question Hippocrates’ intentions (310d). Though the hour was early, Socrates’ attempt to delay

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the visit to Protagoras is not driven by propriety as he implies. Rather, the suggestion that he and Hippocrates stroll around his courtyard “until it becomes light” (311a, eos an gos genetai) is a way of putting off the exposure of Hippocrates’ soul to the threatening influence of the sophist. Providing his reader with an image of the Academy in miniature, Plato shows Socrates detaining Hippocrates in his courtyard, away from the influence of Protagoras – literally, putting a wall between them and “the stranger who has arrived among us.” The delay allows Socrates to raise the issue that Hippocrates has failed to examine himself. It allows Socrates to pose question of whether Hippocrates should entrust his soul to this stranger at all. While it is true, as Coby insists, that Hippocrates will not allow the trip to the sophist to be put off indefinitely (32), the questions that Socrates puts to Hippocrates expose the latter’s ignorance of what a sophist is, of what one teaches and of the dangers inherent in an encounter with one. In doing so, Socrates works to temper his interlocutor’s initial excitement, making him more guarded in his approach.

Socrates is able to give Hippocrates pause, because over the course of the prologue he has indicated the significance of the initially vague question, what will he make of you. The question has been shown to turn upon the treatment (therapeusai) of the soul, “(on whose) harmful or beneficial treatment (one’s) whole welfare depends.” Thus, it is with a meditation on the psychic dangers of encountering a sophist that Plato has Socrates bring the prologue to a close. As he lectures Hippocrates, Socrates draws a parallel between how one cares for the body and how one cares for the soul. Doing so, he indicates more than once the danger (kindunos) that one assumes—the risk one runs (diakindunueonta)—when one seeks treatment for the soul (313a). Socrates continues to underscore the danger of the situation, using cognates of kindunos three more times, as the prologue is brought to a close over the next page.

Socrates continues to invoke this parallel between body and soul as he warns against endangering the soul, but as he concludes his rebuke, he introduces a further image for understanding how the soul is constituted and how it is put at risk. In an attempt to overcome Hippocrates’ inability to say what a sophist is, Socrates proposes that they understand sophists as “merchant(s) or peddler(s) of the goods by which the soul is nourished” (313c). The proposition that the sophist’s goods are those that promise psychic nourishment extends the parallel between the care for the body and the care for the soul. Thus, when Hippocrates asks, “What nourishes the soul?” Socrates will not only answer him literally, by referring to “what it learns” (mathemasin), but he will also explain this answer analogically, likening what one learns to “food for the body” (313c).

Of course, part of the function of Socrates’ description of the sophist as a merchant is to again mark him as a foreign and suspect. Andrea Wilson Nightingale points out that merchants had no fixed place within the existing social order, so they formed an especially suspect class (1995 22). Coby also makes this point and underscores the threat to traditional Athenian mores posed by the practice of introducing new products and customs from other places (31). On his account, Plato dramatizes Socrates’ resistance to the sophists in order to counter the charge that Socrates corrupted the youth. Coby argues, the Protagoras portrays Socrates, “as defender of the virtue of the young against the corrupting influences of sophistry” (20). He does well to point out that several times throughout the dialogue Socrates invokes Protagoras’ tenuous status

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47 This is implied by the amount of activity that is already taking place at Callias’ home by the time they arrive.
48 In some ways this ignorance is induced; the appearance of Hippocrates “ignorance” of what to expect of the sophist is artfully created by Socrates’ techne analogy. Insofar as Hippocrates expects paideia as a sort of general cultivation, with an emphasis on speaking, he knows what to expect, but the terms of this expectation are refused by Socrates’ techne analogy.
as a foreigner as a way of calling his character into question (Prot. 313c, 316d, 342a-343c). However, Coby construes the dialogue’s concern with what is foreign much too narrowly. Coby’s conception of the foreign makes it accord with the boundaries of the polis. This prompts him to treat Socrates’ suggestion that he and Hippocrates consult their elders as an unproblematic alternative to exposing their souls to Protagoras (31). We will see, however, that there is no unproblematic or anxiety-free discursive situation, because whoever the interlocutor, it is an inescapable reality of the discursive situation as such that the soul is exposed to influences outside of itself. Any discursive encounter is, for better or worse, an intimate and potentially transformative encounter with what is foreign to the soul. The Platonic anxiety over the foreign is not about political boundaries as Coby suggests; it is about psychic boundaries.

The suggestion that Socrates and Hippocrates could avoid risking their souls by consulting their elders is undercut by an image of the soul that Socrates develops to express the relationship between it and the teachings that promise to nourish it. While questioning the “nutritional” value of sophistic teachings, Socrates imagines the soul as a sort of vessel or receptacle for knowledge. The image of the soul as a vessel, establishes a dissimilarity between commercial transactions completed in order to care for the body and those made in order to care for the soul. Caring for the soul, Socrates explains, is much more dangerous than acquiring nourishment for the body:

> The risk (kindunos) you run in purchasing knowledge is much greater than buying provisions. When you buy food and drink you can carry it away from the shop… in a receptacle (angeiois), and before you receive it into your body by eating or drinking you can… take the advice of an expert as to what you should eat and drink… But knowledge cannot be taken away in a parcel (angeio). When you have paid for it you must receive it straight into your soul… and be benefited or harmed accordingly. (314a-b)

Socrates describes teachings (or more broadly, logoi) as part of the soul’s metabolism. The soul digests what it learns, so that what it learns becomes a part of the soul. By maintaining the analogy to the body while imagining the soul as a receptacle, it becomes clear that the soul is a receptacle of a very special kind. The soul is a receptacle that is transformed by what it receives. In one sense, the image of the soul as a receptacle for what nourishes it extends the parallel between it and the body, for the body is also transformed by what it consumes. What distinguishes the soul in this respect is the immediacy of its exposure. In the discursive encounter, the soul is more vulnerable to what might prove nourishing or noxious to it than the body, because unlike food and drink, which can be contained within a separate vessel, no such vessel exists for logoi.⁴⁹ The soul, Socrates suggests, is the only vessel for these goods. There are nothing to contain logoi, whose walls could contain such teachings in strict separation from the soul, quarantining them until one could consult an expert regarding their nutritional value.

Indeed, even if such a strict separation could be maintained and one could come away from Protagoras, holding his teachings in a separate vessel, one would run into two further problems: First, it is unclear whether there are any experts on the care of the soul. As we have

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⁴⁹ An additional difficulty stems from Socrates’ position in the Protagoras that there are no recognized experts in virtue (arete) (319d). To complicate things even further, Nehamas argues that according to Socrates’ position, the ability to recognize experts in arete is paradoxical. According to the Protagoras, on his account, the conditions that would enable one to recognize the expert (e.g., on justice) would be expert knowledge. So, one would not be able to recognize the expert if one needed to consult one, but if one did not need one—if one was an expert—one could recognize an expert (Nehamas 1998 82).
seen in the *Gorgias*, Socrates is largely preoccupied with distinguishing the experts in the art of caring for the soul from those who falsely claim that art. In that dialogue, Socrates even goes so far as to suggest that he might be the only living practitioner of this art. In the *Protagoras*, we find that Socrates doubting whether there are *any* experts capable of teaching justice (319d). More importantly, the act of consulting an expert is precisely what constitutes a violation of the subject by what is foreign to it. It is precisely this act of consulting an expert, Protagoras, which gives rise to the anxiety over the effect of his *logoi*.

This description of the relationship between speech and the soul raises the stakes of every discursive encounter, because it means that anytime one is in dialogue with another, the health and well being—the very constitution—of the soul hangs in the balance. The image of the soul as a receptacle suggests, pace Coby, that these are the conditions that attend any discursive situation. The promise of nourishment and the threat of contamination by what is foreign attend any encounter with new *logoi*. One cannot assume, then, that some discourses can be trusted or that one can rely on authority of one’s elders, family or community, as Coby suggests. Socrates rejects such appeals in the *Protagoras* (338b-e). Moreover, complicating Coby’s treatment of him as a guard against the foreign (narrowly construed), the *Phaedrus*’ account of philosophical eroticism portrays philosophical *eros* as breaking the same bonds that tie the pair of lovers to their family, friends and *polis* (249d-e, 252a). 50 Indeed, as we will see as we turn to *Phaedrus*, the threat of contamination and the promise of nourishment are not only present in any encounter with *logoi*, but they also haunt any encounter with the images within the phenomenal world.

III. Flows of Discourse, Flows of Desire: Contamination & Purification in *Phaedrus*

If Socrates’ warning to Hippocrates suggests the danger of another’s discourse contaminating one’s soul, the *Phaedrus* stages the drama on the violated body of Socrates. In the *Phaedrus*, the analogy identifying the soul with a vessel is both less and more prominently featured than it is the *Protagoras*. On the one hand, the *Phaedrus* lacks anything resembling a prologue, so the analogy is not used to frame Socrates’ intentions in the dialogue as a whole. The analogy will continue to express Socrates’ concerns regarding the soul’s openness to contamination by foreign discourses, and it will again be used to comment on Socrates’ relation to specific discourses that appear within the text itself. However, the placement of the analogy is less conspicuous. It is not until after Socrates and Phaedrus make their way into the Athenian countryside and Phaedrus delivers Lysias’ speech in praise of the non-lover that Socrates describes his soul as a vessel that has been invaded by alien voices.

Socrates uses this analogy in the preface to his first speech, in praise of the non-lover, as a way of disowning the speech and abdicating responsibility (*aitios*) for it in advance. What is at stake in the disavowal, however, is unclear until Socrates elaborates on the analogy in the interval between his first and second speeches; so, though the analogy eventually becomes important, it is initially easy to overlook.

I argue that this analogy bridges the dialogue’s two major concerns, rhetoric and erotics. Insofar as the analogy works to figure the relationship between speech and the soul, it should be understood as part of the *Phaedrus*’ broader meditation on the art of rhetoric (271a-b). As I will show, the analogy fulfills two of the three major tasks that Socrates assigns to the “serious art of rhetoric” (*spoude technen rhetoriken*): (1) it “describes the soul” and it (2) “describe(s) what natural capacity [the soul] has to act upon what… (and) be acted upon” (271a). The analogy not

50 The description of philosophical eroticism actually shows that Socrates’ effect on this set of relationships is much the same as the effect that Protagoras describes when he explains why the sophist’s presence generates antagonism on the part of his students’ loved ones (316d).
only describes the soul in its capacity to act upon and be acted upon by *logoi*, but it also describes the soul as it is acted upon by and acts upon desire and images of beauty. In doing so, this figure repeats Gorgias’ gesture of closely coupling *eros* and *logos*. The analogy is only explicitly invoked when Socrates considers the relationship of his soul to the *logoi* that have invaded him. However, his descriptions of the causes and mechanics of erotic passion also conform to and reinforce the image of the soul as a receptacle.

**A Passion for Discourse: The Invasion of Socrates**

Though easy enough to overlook, the receptacle analogy not only bridges the dialogue’s overarching concerns with rhetoric and erotics, but it also provides a link between the three speeches that make up the first half of the dialogue. What prompts Socrates to develop this analogy is his disagreement with Phaedrus over how to evaluate Lysias’ encomium for the non-lover. After delivering Lysias’ speech, Phaedrus asks Socrates whether he agrees that it is “extraordinarily fine” (234c), but Socrates’ response disappoints his friend:

> Amazingly fine indeed, my friend. I was thrilled by it (*me ekplagenai*, I was struck). And it was you, Phaedrus, that *made me feel* (*epathon*, suffer) as I did. I watched your apparent delight (*edokeis ganusthai*) in the words as you read. And as I’m sure that you understand such matters better than I do, I took my cue from you and therefore joined in the ecstasy of my right worshipful companion. (234d)

Socrates’ response is remarkable, first of all, because it draws a parallel between the effects of images (or appearances, *edokeis*) and effects of words (*upo tou logou*). This is one of the many moments in which the *Phaedrus* begins to stitch together rhetoric and erotics. Socrates notes the ability of Lysias’ *logoi* to send Phaedrus into a state of ecstasy. This is not entirely surprising. The Platonic dialogues frequently cite the ability of *logos* to push the subject outside of itself. Like Socrates’ reaction here, the dialogues also frequently underscore the violence inherent in this experience. What is surprising is that Socrates draws such a close parallel between the *logos*-induced ecstasy of Phaedrus and his own. Socrates is clear that his ecstasy is *not* derived from the same source as that of Phaedrus. Lysias’ encomium is *not* what has inspired Socrates. Rather, it is the appearance—the vision, the image—of Phaedrus that has him enflamed.

It is important to note the different sources of these characters’ rapture—the discourse of Lysias vs. the image of Phaedrus—because, even if Socrates’ reaction is ironic, it gives an early indication of the close parallel that the text will draw between the effect of discourse on the soul (rhetoric) and that of beauty (erotics). Indeed, Socrates’ description of the effect of seeing Phaedrus read raises the question of the relation between the passion (*pathos*) of the lover (the way in which he is “struck” by and suffers the force of beauty’s image, *ekplagenai*) and the passion of the listener. The force of *logoi* is not mentioned here, but it will be discussed soon enough (235c-237a, 242d-e), and even within this limited context, it becomes apparent that the effects of speech and of images begin to converge in a Gorgianic manner. Thus, Socrates’ description of being “struck” should also be taken as giving some indication of the force with which the speech affects Phaedrus. I will return to this issue below, but it is also important to note the dramatic function of Socrates’ comment.

By insisting on the different origins of his and Phaedrus’ ecstasy, Socrates begins to subject Lysias’ speech to criticism. The fuller criticism of the speech is saved for Socrates’

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51 This might be read as an allusion to Gorgias. Playing with the etymological connection between appearance (*edokeis*) and belief (doxa), Plato hints at Gorgias’ epistemology, suggesting that doxa keeps the psyche subject to forces outside of itself.

52 For example, see *Men* 235a-c, *Crat* 396e, *Prot* 339d, *Gorgias* 505d-e.
second speech and the discussion of rhetoric that follows it, but Socrates does begin to enumerate some of its weaknesses here (234e-235a). More important, Socrates’ criticism provokes Phaedrus to come to Lysias’ defense. “Tell me truly,” Phaedrus insists, “do you think there is anyone in Greece who could make a finer and more exhaustive speech on the same subject” (234e)? Socrates’ response disappoints him. There not only are people who are capable of doing so, he observes, but such speeches have already been made (235b). The important thing about this exchange is that it creates a demand for Socrates’ first speech, which in turn, will allow the concern about one’s relationship to foreign discourses to come to the fore.

Phaedrus’ insistence that Socrates identify who has managed to compete with Lysias prompts Socrates to reflect upon the relationship between himself as a reader/auditor and the discourses that he encounters. As in the prologue of the *Protagoras*, Socrates expresses this problem by likening himself to a receptacle that has come to hold the discourses of others. Explaining to Phaedrus that he cannot identify the author of this discourse, Socrates says:

I can’t tell you offhand, but I’m sure I have heard something better, from the fair Sappho maybe, or the wise Anacreon, or perhaps some prose writer…. There is something welling up within my breast (pleres pos… to stefos) that makes me feel that I could find something different and something better, to say. I am of course well aware it can’t be anything originating in my own mind, for I know my own ignorance, so I suppose it can only be that it has been poured into me through my ears as into a receptacle (angeiou) from some external source. (235c-d, translation modified)

Here, as when he compares the soul to a receptacle in the *Protagoras*, Socrates stresses the intimacy into which discourse and the soul enter. Socrates describes his experience of listening as being penetrated by a stream (namaton) of discourse. What has been heard not only penetrates Socrates, filling him (peplerosthai me), but it retains some agency of its own as it wells up within his breast in response to Phaedrus’ ecstasy. Thus, Socrates distances himself from the discourse he is about to deliver. It comes to him as “something” different, “something” better, which, though it wells up within him, comes on its own accord from an unknown source. The discourse of another penetrates Socrates through his ears and eyes, and continues to act within him, responding to stimuli in its environment independent of Socrates’ will.

Yet, in spite of the testimony to Socrates’ violation and to the independence that the word of another retains as it occupies his soul, the situation described here seems less menacing than the situation the same analogy describes in the *Protagoras*. As a matter fact, rather than responding to Socrates’ description of his invasion by a foreign discourse with the consternation shown by Hippocrates, Phaedrus is overjoyed. “Well said! You move me to admiration,” he exclaims as he anticipates Socrates’ “undertak(ing) to make a better speech than that in the book here” (235d). Though he comes across as naïve at times, it is understandable that Phaedrus would overlook Socrates’ initial indication of the dangers posed by alien discourses. Unlike the prologue of the *Protagoras*, Socrates’ description of the relation between himself and the discourse of others is not framed as a warning about the dangers of alien *logoi*. Though the danger of allowing a stranger a role in one’s education has been raised by Lysias’ encomium of the non-lover and will continue to remain a concern throughout the dialogue, Socrates’ comment is not directly framed in terms of the care of the soul.

The tone of Socrates’ description of his experience with the word of another remains lighthearted. While it is true that his psychic boundaries have been violated, Socrates’
description of another’s discourse flowing into him as into a receptacle is not overly negative. This makes it easy to overlook the analogy, because little seems to be at stake in it. Nevertheless, the situation that Socrates describes here is essentially the same as the one he warns Hippocrates about in the *Protagoras*. In fact, in the *Phaedrus*, the threat posed by foreign discourses seems more pervasive, for unlike the start of the *Protagoras*, the physical isolation of Socrates’ companion does not suffice to stave off encounters with alien voices.

**Proliferating Discourses.** Despite the distance Socrates and Phaedrus put between themselves and the murmuring city, the “quiet spot” that they settle into is abuzz with a variety of voices (229a). The whole dialogue is set in a context that constantly hums with, “the shrill summery music of the cicada choir” (230c), whose story embodies the seductive dangers of song (259b). However, as Nightingale points out, “the most obtrusive category of ‘alien discourse’… (is) hearsay” (136). Quotations or repetitions of things read and heard permeate the dialogue. Phaedrus is a major source of hearsay, Nightingale observes, because “[he] has a penchant for repeating what other people say” (136).

This concern, of course, is not unique to the *Phaedrus*. There are other Platonic dialogues that are composed entirely of hearsay. In the *Symposium*, for instance, Apollodorus actually tells the story of his recent retelling of Aristodemus’ story, so gives a quotation of a quotation. Similarly, the *Menexenus* is presented as a series of quotations that have been authored by Aspasia. Likewise, the *Cratylus* finds Socrates continually attributing his etymological analyses to Euthyphro. In fact, Socrates’ first description of Euthyphronian inspiration actually raises many of the same anxieties and concerns that we see played out in the *Phaedrus*. Tracing a sudden flash of wisdom back to Euthyphro, Socrates says,

> I caught the inspiration from the great Euthyphro… who gave me a long lecture… He talked and I listened, and his wisdom and enchanting ravishment have not only filled my ears but taken possession of my soul, and today I shall let his superhuman power work… but tomorrow… we will conjure him away and make a purgation of him (*katharoumetha*), if we can find some priest or Sophist who is skilled in purifications of this sort. (396d-e)

As in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates not only testifies the violation of his psychic boundaries by the word of another, but he describes the result as a sort of possession that requires a rite of purification. As we will see in the *Phaedrus*, after delivering his encomium of the non-lover, Socrates will again call for catharsis. So, it is clear that neither the Platonic concern with hearsay nor its appearance in a dialogue is unique to *Phaedrus*. What makes hearsay and other forms of foreign *logoi* particularly noticeable in the *Phaedrus* is the huge proliferation of quoted sources. Phaedrus’ opening line, which is a quotation of the doctor, Acumenus, sets the tone for the dialogue as a whole. Running up to the analogy that Socrates uses to describe being inhabited by foreign discourses, both characters show a penchant for quotation. After the initial citation of Acumenus’ advice that walking in the country is more invigorating than doing so in the city, the discourses of others begin to proliferate. The most obvious example of a foreign discourse entering into the scene, of course, occurs when Phaedrus reads the speech of Lysias that he had carried there. The delivery this speech constitutes a four-page long quotation (230e-234d). However, that is only one example among many of the foreign voices that intrude upon this seemingly isolated scene. Both Phaedrus and Socrates make extensive reference to mythology. They not only cite the story of Orithyia, Boreas and Pharmacia and the Egyptian myth, but they also refer to Chimera, centaurs, Gorgons, Pegasuses, and Typhon. They also cite anonymous, contemporary discourses that seek to provide a rational basis for such myths (229b-
230b). Moreover, Socrates dismisses the latter type of discourse by citing another form of discourse, the Delphic injunction, “know thyself.” Socrates cites this text when he insists that he must investigate himself prior to indulging in rationalistic explanations of myth (230a). In moments such as these, the Phaedrus seems intent upon accumulating quotation after quotation.

A particularly interesting moment of this accretion of quotations comes at the very start of the text. Following on the heels of Phaedrus’ invocation of Acumenus’ advice, Socrates uses two quotes to describe his relationship to the discourse of others. After hearing that Phaedrus has a speech to report, Socrates quotes Pindar to say that he will prioritize hearing Phaedrus’ account of Lysias’ discourse “above all business” (227b). This is not the most telling quotation. It does indicate that hearing the discourses of others is a priority for Socrates, but it does not describe his attitude toward such discourse beyond that. It does not say much, for instance, regarding the affective experience—the pleasure and anxieties—involved in such contact. However, only a few lines into the text, it alerts the reader to the importance of the philosopher’s relationship to the discourses of others while also giving some indication of what an inextricable web of quotations Socrates finds himself in. The fact that Socrates quotes Pindar to describe his excitement at hearing Phaedrus quote Lysias indicates the tendency of quotations to proliferate and enter into mutual relations.

Socrates’ next quotation is more illuminating. Reiterating his desire to hear the speech, Socrates directly echoes the medical advice invoked by Phaedrus. Socrates insists that his desire to hear the speech (epitethueka akousai) is so strong that to hear it, he would “walk as far as Megara… and back again as recommended by Herodicus” (227d). This quotation indicates two features of Socrates’ approach to the discourse of others:

First, by having Socrates describe his desire (epitethueka, from epithumeo) to hear these logoi, Plato has begun to knit together the issues of erotics and rhetoric. Epithumeo does not exclusively signify erotic desire, but it does invoke the intense longing associated with eros (and the verb erao). Plato seems intent upon marking this convergence. Not a page later, Socrates will recast his desire in the language specific to eros. When Phaedrus flirtatiously teases Socrates, feigning an inability to perform Lysias’ speech, Socrates plays the part of the stricken lover and begs Phaedrus to please him. At this point, Socrates not only plays the lover, but he describes himself and Phaedrus both as “lover(s) of discourses” (228c, ton logon eraston). As the exchange is played out, logos and eros even come to share the same seat (or, perhaps “lap”). After getting Phaedrus to abandon his affectation of shyness, Socrates sees that Phaedrus has designs to improvise his own version of Lysias’ speech. However, this will not do. Socrates continues to play the lover, when he asks Phaedrus to reveal what is under his cloak. “First, my love (philotes),” Socrates says, “show me what you have in your left hand under your cloak” (229d). What is revealed, of course, is not the phallus in the flesh, but the phallic scroll that contains Lysias’ speech. I will return to the convergence of erotics and rhetoric, but for now let it suffice to say that the Platonic/Socratic interest in logos is intensely erotic.

The second function of Socrates’ invocation of Herodicus’ advice is that it begins to portray his concern with the word of another as a concern with one’s health. Obviously, this is not a literally medical issue. Unlike Phaedrus’ reference to Acumenus, Socrates’ citation of Herodicus has little to do with a physical regimen. Rather, by referring again to a doctor Socrates begins to locate himself in a domain that is metaphorically medical. As in the Protagoras and in the Gorgias, Socrates’ attitude toward the word of another is part of his attempt to care for the soul. This is a rather oblique way to indicate that his concern with the word of another is a concern with the health of the soul. However, the issue of psychic health
will quickly come to the fore, as Socrates picks up on the traditional Greek pathologization of the lover and extends it to his own situation as a lover of discourse. His intense desire for speech, Socrates says, has rendered him “sick for discourse” (228b, to nosounti peri logon aken).

Given the propensity of Socrates to describe philosophy as medicine and himself as a doctor, it should not be surprising that his speech slides into a medical register. What might be surprising is that the medico-philosophical preoccupation with guarding the soul against contamination by the discourse of another is not clearly articulated here. Aside from hinting that such a pathological desire threatens to subject him to the will of another, Socrates does not expand upon what it means to be “sick for discourse.” The more ominous implications of Socrates’ sickness, however, will be brought out as he and Phaedrus settle into their spot.

Once there, Socrates recasts the description of his willingness to follow Phaedrus to Megara in more unsettling terms. When Phaedrus comments on how Socrates seems “totally out of place…. (as if) you (have) never even set foot beyond the city walls” (230c-d), he responds, 

Forgive me, my friend. I am devoted to learning (philomathes); landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me—only people in the city can do that. But you, I think, have found a potion to charm me into leaving (emis exodu to pharmakon). For just as people lead hungry animals forward by shaking branches of fruit before them, you can lead me all over Attica or anywhere else you like simply by waviing in front of me the leaves of a book containing a speech. (230d-e)

Here, Socrates not only indicates that his desire threatens to subject him, like a hungry animal, to the will of another, but he links that subjection to his depiction of logos as a pharmakon (which threatens possession in another way). Plato is on familiar ground when he reworks the image of Socrates, the erastes who begs his beloved to please him into an image of a beast that is conquered by the object of its desire. This image is a part of the traditional, Athenian pathologization of eros that Lysias and Socrates both invoke (231d, 250e).

The Platonic twist to this image is that Socrates’ object of desire is logos. This desire not only defines him as a philomathes, but it situates him in the world, binding him to a particular place (topos), the city. This is why Socrates appears so out of place (atopotatos) once he exits its walls. Plato is still drawing on the traditional suspicion of eros. Desire and logos both are ambivalent here. At the same time that desire for logos determines who Socrates is—that he is a philomathes; desire and logos both also appear capable of disrupting that identity. They draw him out of his familiar haunts. The situation in which Socrates finds himself is uncertain: Phaedrus’ pharmakon, Lysias’ logos, possesses Socrates, drawing him out of his usual place and out of his usual practice (dialectic). Insofar as it disrupts his practice and place, Phaedrus’ pharmakon threatens death. Socrates’ very existence comes into question. At the same time, the book/pharmakon could prove nourishing; it could bolster Socrates’ identity. Logos has all the ambivalence of the fruit that is held before the wild beast, it can nourish or ensnare.

For the time being, however, Socrates does not dwell on the potentially menacing consequences of his desire for logoi. In fact, he seems so giddy in this scene that one almost gets the sense that, unlike the Protagoras, the Phaedrus will only deal with the nourishment offered by logos, not the possible threat that it constitutes. Nonetheless, Plato obliquely anticipates the full ambivalence of the soul’s relation to logos, preparing the ground for the dialogue’s dramatization of this problem.

Context & Compulsion: The Invasion of Socrates

Needless to say, quotations and other citations of alien discourses continue to circulate and saturate the dialogue running up to and beyond Socrates’ description of being inhabited by
foreign discourse. With the two attributed encomia of non-lovers (Lysias’ and the anonymous one that Socrates delivers) and the countless minor quotations that buzz about them, sometimes invading the speakers, Plato sets this dialogue in a context that is thick with quotations. Against this background, what the invasion of Socrates illustrates is that quotations do not remain in the context, but by their own volition they seem to run through the speakers themselves, overcoming their struggles to disentangle themselves from this context. This not only effects a blurring of the line between the text of a given utterance and the context in which it is set, but it calls the agency of the subject—its ability to speak for itself and to initiate a causal series—into question.

Indeed, the point of the receptacle-analogy is to present Socrates’ encomium for the non-lover as a quotation that is unwilled. It is by virtue of the fact that Socrates is a receptacle that the words of others are able to penetrate him and arrive on the scene as they do. And it seems to be a peculiar attribute of logoi that they retain enough of the intention of their absent authors, to be able to well up within their new host and respond to their environment independent of the auditor/speaker’s will. What this means is that like Gorgias’ rivals in Helen, like Gorgias himself, Socrates speaks by virtue of his position as an auditor. Though Socrates is unable to name with certainty the father of the speech—Sappho, Anacreon or “some prose writer”—he is clear that it did not originate from him and its present movement, the swelling in his breast, is not within his control. What the preface to Socrates’ first speech hints at, but does not make entirely clear is the extent to which it is the product of compulsion. Socrates is compelled to speak. The receptacle analogy hints at this insofar as it figures Socrates as the passive site that is traversed by foreign logoi rather than the agent behind the speech. However, only after the speech, in Socrates’ rejection of it, does one sense of the extent to which he feels violated by it.

That Socrates’ speech is a product of compulsion is also suggested, albeit indirectly, through his flirtatious exchange with Phaedrus. After indicating to Phaedrus that a speech of uncertain paternity is welling up within him, Socrates cannot get out of delivering it. In the banter that follows, Phaedrus makes a series of threats in order to force Socrates to deliver the speech. In the short exchange that precedes Socrates’ speech, the verb, anangkein (“to compel”) and its cognates are used five times. Prominent references to compulsion are also supplemented by two families of words, referring, on the one hand, to violence or force (bian), strength (isxuroteros), and twisting (strephe); and, on the other hand, to desire (epithumei, boulethes) or will (ekon, keleues) and its realization or violation (236c-237a).

Phaedrus’ attempt to compel Socrates’ speech takes two tacks. First, Phaedrus threatens Socrates with physical violence. He begins by accusing Socrates of holding out on him. Mirroring the flirtatious exchange in which Socrates insisted that Phaedrus was playing coy and that he wanted to deliver Lysias’ speech (228a-c), Phaedrus cites Socrates’ words directly, “do not deliberately compel (anagkasai) me to utter the words, ‘Don’t I know my Socrates? If not, I’ve forgotten my own identity,’ or ‘He wanted to speak (epithumei legein), but made difficulties about it’” (230c). In citing Socrates’ words, Phaedrus replays their initial exchange while adopting the role of lover himself. The difference however is that where Socrates pleaded, Phaedrus makes demands. Like Phaedrus, Socrates had conducted their previous exchange in the third person, but he assumed a much more subservient posture.

When the lover of discourses begged him (Phaedrus) to discourse,” Socrates had said, “he became difficult, pretending he didn’t want to (epithumon), though he

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53 Noting Socrates’ comparison of himself to Typhon, who is distinguished by “his hundred snake heads with their dark tongues… (that) utter sounds of every kind,” each of which is intelligible to the gods, Nightingale suggests that “the Typhon’s plurivocality” is echoed at the level of the text which is itself “a conspiracy of voices” (134-135).
meant to do so ultimately, *even if he had to force himself upon an unwilling listener (kai ei me tis ekon akouoi bia).* So beg him, Phaedrus, to do straightway what he will soon do in any case. (228c, translation modified)

Despite Socrates’ suspicion that Phaedrus is ready to force (*bia*) the speech on him regardless of his will (*ekon*), Socrates begs Phaedrus to deliver it. However, when Phaedrus cites these words and seeks to extract a speech from Socrates, instead of begging, he playfully threatens violence. “We are by ourselves in a lonely place,” Phaedrus tells him, “and I am stronger (*isxuroteros*) and younger than you… (so) ‘mistake not what I say,’ and further you would not have me use force (*pros bia*) rather than speak willingly (*ekon legein*)” (236c-d, translation modified). Of course, it is one thing to say that the *logoi* occupying Socrates retain some independent agency, which subjects him to compulsion; it is quite another to describe Phaedrus’ threat of physical violence as compulsion. I do not pretend that the compulsion in both cases is the same. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in the preface to the first two speeches the specter of compulsion (*ananke, bia*) and the violation of Socrates’ will (*ekon*) figure so prominently. Though it takes a variety of forms, compulsion seems to haunt these characters’ relationship to each other and to alien *logoi*.

When the threat of physical violence fails to compel Socrates, Phaedrus adopts a second, more successful strategy. Instead of bemoaning Socrates’ apparent desire to withhold his speech, Phaedrus turns the threat around. “No more of this affectation,” he tells him, “I have *something to say* which will compel you to speak (*exo ho eipon anankaso se legein*)…. I swear that unless you deliver your speech… I will assuredly never again reclaim or report any other speech by any other author whatsoever” (236d-e). After hearing this new threat, Socrates agrees that Phaedrus has discovered “the means of compelling a lover of discourse” (*ten ananken andri philologo*)… to do (his) bidding (*keleues*)” (236e). This should not be surprising, for Socrates has already twice noted the means available for subjecting him to the will of another. Socrates had not only told Phaedrus that in order to hear a speech he would follow him to Megara, but he reiterated this statement in stronger terms when he likened himself to a beast that can be driven anywhere by using *logos* as bait. Socrates has been quite clear that his desire for discourse opens him up to foreign influence, rendering him susceptible to the will of another.

As Socrates invokes the muses at the start of his speech, he makes one last protest. He insists that he speaks under duress, “under compulsion by my good friend” (237a), Phaedrus. However, despite the protest, Socrates complies. Was there ever much doubt that he would? In some respects, Phaedrus’ adoption of Socrates’ words, “He wanted to speak, but made difficulties about it,” is apt. Despite his protests, there was never much doubt that Socrates would give the speech. Phaedrus seems right insofar as he taps into Socrates’ earlier suggestion that the delivery of the speech was inevitable, so he might as well do it “straightway,” but there remain significant differences between the conditions under which both characters speak. In particular, whereas the authorship of the first speech, Phaedrus’ possession of it and his desire to deliver it are all taken at face value, the invasion of Socrates by foreign *logoi* gives us every reason to understand his authorship of the speech, his “possession” of it, and desire for it as problematic. Socrates’ appraisal of the speech is also much more ambivalent than Phaedrus’ praise of Lysias. He only claims that he could find “something better” to say (235c); and, given his refusal to evaluate Lysias’ speech, this withholding a lot about what he thinks of “his” speech.

Finally, whereas the threat of force (*bia*) emanates from Phaedrus, the speaker, in the case of the first speech, in the case of the second speech, it emanates from Phaedrus, the auditor.

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54 “By ascribing his speech to… a number of disparate authors,” Nightingale argues, “Socrates problematizes the very notion of individual authorship” (1995 138).
So despite their shifting conversational roles, in both cases, Socrates finds himself under the threat of violence. This is where Phaedrus’ quotation of Socrates gets it wrong. The threat of compulsion, which he was not under, complicates the claim that Socrates wanted to speak. The lengths to which Phaedrus must go in order to compel Socrates to speak suggest that Socrates’ heart is not entirely in it. Unlike Phaedrus who cannot say enough in praise of Lysias (and who walked outside of the city to practice declaiming his speech), Socrates’ desire to deliver the speech that he carries with him is not unqualified. Retrospectively, of course, Socrates’ situation calls into question how one should understand Phaedrus’ situation; for Socrates’ delivery of the speech illustrates that sometimes actions seem to issue from the soul that do not properly belong to it. So, while Phaedrus’ delivery of Lysias’ speech initially appears an unproblematic result of his will, the drama with Socrates should cause us to reconsider whether that can be taken at face value. However, for now, it is necessary to bracket this issue, because it is the palinode that provides us with the hermeneutic tools necessary for distinguishing between the soul’s real and apparent desires.

Again, it is one thing to claim that the dialogue consistently connects discourse and compulsion, whether through playful threats or through Phaedrus’ attempt to manipulate Socrates. It is quite another to claim that the dialogue implicates discourse more fundamentally in violence. It is the latter claim that I want to stress. The consistent coupling of discourse and compulsion in a more mundane sense, I contend, is a way of raising the specter of compulsion so as to draw attention to its workings within discourse itself.

Socrates as Text & Territory

Socrates’ desire to deliver the speech is attenuated by the experience he describes of being invaded by foreign discourses. Though elsewhere Socrates describes his hunger for logoi, it does not sound like an expression of his will when the discourses of Sappho et al well up in his breast in response to Lysias. As a receptacle for discourse, Socrates looks more like the place where this infusion and swelling occurs than he does the agent behind it. In this respect Socrates bears some resemblance to Roland Barthes’ description of a text (and its “scriptor”) in “Death of the Author.” There, Barthes writes, “a text… (is) a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations.”

Barthes contrasts his treatment of a text as a space in which quotations from elsewhere reproduce themselves with the romantic understanding of “the author” as the temporal antecedent, origin and causal power behind his discourse. “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book…. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecendence to his work as a father to a child” (145). The text, by contrast allows for no easy separation between the speaking subject and the foreign logoi (the quotations), that make up his utterance; so it is not possible to separate what is proper to the subject from what is other.

Barthes not only indicates the problem that Plato, following Gorgias, is struggling with, but he also helps us see is that there are two very different experiences of discourse that are at work in the Platonic dialogue. On the one hand, Socrates’ discussion of the proper use of writing, at the end of the Phaedrus, invokes the same analogy that Barthes does in his discussion of authorship. The speaker, Socrates insists, is a father to his discourse; he not only gives it life by planting it, like a seed/spermata, in the proper soil but he must be present to nourish it (276e). Otherwise, like an orphan, it will be at the mercy of anyone who comes across it, for “it always

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needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend... itself” (275e). However, this logos, this helpless child who needs its father to defend it, looks quite different from the logoi that invade and subjugate Socrates. These logoi are much more akin to the blending and clashing discourses of Barthes’ text. They come from elsewhere—Sappho, Anacreon, Lysias, Phaedrus—and act upon Socrates, who is their destination and effect, not their cause and origin.

There are two important differences between how Socrates imagines his occupation and Barthes’ description of a text. While they both invoke spatial metaphors in order to think through the speaker’s relation to discourse, Barthes describes the speaker as a surface that is constituted by what is “foreign” to it. It is a “tissue of quotations,” woven together like a textile. As such, it is without depth, without outside or inside. It is made up completely of what is other. Some of the metaphors of Plato’s Socrates, such as the depiction of logos as food, also treat discourse as constitutive of the subject. However, the receptacle analogy also suggests a more stable distinction between the inside and outside of the soul. The key difference, however, is that where Barthes holds the text/thescriptor up as a model of writing that he values, Plato’s Socrates bristles at this pathological experience of language. Indeed, Socrates seems intent upon moving toward a more authorial, single-voiced discourse (on the model articulated at the end of the Phaedrus) as he tries to extricate himself from the tangled web of quotations in which he begins.

The situation does not seem menacing at the beginning of the speech, but it takes a sinister turn. After censuring the lover for his faults, Socrates abruptly breaks off his encomium of the non-lover, “There, let that be the end of my discourse” (241d). He insists that there is no need to drag the speech out, but he and Phaedrus both comment on how hasty the end seems. Phaedrus points out that Socrates has not yet praised the non-lover and says, “I thought you were only halfway through” (241d). The abruptness of the conclusion signals that something is amiss, and invites Socrates to comment on his relationship to the speech just delivered. When Phaedrus asks why Socrates suddenly abandoned the speech, he responds, “Haven’t you noticed that I’ve got beyond dithyramb, and am breaking out into epic verse, despite my faultfinding? Don’t you see that I shall clearly be possessed by those nymphs into whose clutches you deliberately threw me” (241e)? Nightingale explains the significance of Socrates’ remark on the impropriety of his meter. “Plato alerts us to the boundaries – and, indeed, the boundedness – of the genre (encomium).... Socrates can’t even complete the censorious part of the speech without slipping into a mode of rhetoric loftier than that used for the discourse of blame” (155). Socrates’ comment then indicates that his speech is transgressing generic boundaries. In fact, failing to praise the non-lover, it is questionable whether the speech should even be considered an encomium. More importantly, the speech’s violation of generic boundaries is mirrored by its violation of Socrates’ psychic boundaries. As in the preface to the speech, at its conclusion Socrates insists that he has been invaded by alien logoi. He reiterates that he has been subject to forces beyond himself, and claims that Phaedrus has “thrown” (proubales) him into the clutches of nymphs, who will surely come to “possess” (enthusiaso) him if he continues.

Possession is a persistent concern. In fact, Socrates had already interrupted the speech once before in order to raise the issue. After defining love, Socrates suspends the speech to ask, “Well, Phaedrus, do you think, as I do, that I am divinely inspired” (238c)? The Greek that is translated “I am divinely inspired,” theion pathos peponthenai, might be rendered more literally, “I suffer from something divine that has befallen me.” This is not a better translation, but it helps to communicate the emphasis on passivity created by the redundant Greek: pathos.

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56 Socrates’ failure to deliver a proper encomium for the non-lover parallels Gorgias’ failure to do so for Helen. As Phaedrus and Isocrates, point out, Socrates and Gorgias neglect to praise their respective objects of praise.
(something suffered) *peponthenai* (from *paskein*, to suffer, the same verb from which *pathos* is derived). In any case, the question emphasizes that Socrates is not the author or the agent behind this speech, but is simply the place it passes through. Like his commentary at the end of the speech, Socrates goes on to insist that Phaedrus, not himself, is the cause (*aitios*) of what he says (238d). He also anticipates breaking into dithyramb, and explains this is likely because he is in danger of being “caught by nymphs” (238d, *numpholepto*).

Socrates’ statements are somewhat contradictory, for he claims both that he is possessed and that he is in danger of becoming possessed. At various points throughout the speech, he claims to be acting under daemonic (234d) or divine influence (238c), but then he expresses the hope of avoiding capture by such powers (238d, 241e). For instance, as we have just seen when Socrates interrupts his speech the first time, he suggests that if he breaks into dithyramb, it will be symptomatic of his possession by the nymphs (238d). But then, after going “beyond dithyramb,” he continues to treat the threat of possession as a future possibility rather than a present reality. Thus, he claims, “(if I continue) I shall clearly be possessed by those nymphs into whose clutches you deliberately threw me.” However, the possible confusion here is simply a testament to the great variety of snares and influences from which Socrates struggles to escape.

**PROPHYLACTICS FOR THE SOUL: Defending Endangered Psychic Boundaries**

The intersection between Socrates’ struggle to escape the compulsion of Phaedrus and his struggle to elude capture by the nymphs offers a prime example of what a complicated set of relations, the soul is implicated in at any given time. When he first anticipated the threat of falling into prey to the nymphs, he hoped to avert the situation by continuing the speech (238d), but when he breaks it off he reasons that silence is a better defense. After explaining to Phaedrus why he ended his speech, Socrates declares “My story can be left to the fate appropriate to it, and I will take myself across the river here before you compel (*anankasthenai*) me to greater lengths” (242a, translation modified). What we see here is that the threat of possession is manifold. It is Phaedrus who has “thrown” Socrates to the nymphs, so if he is to escape their grasp, he must also escape the grasp of Phaedrus. In this case, it is not enough to break off the speech. In order to ensure his escape from the nymphs, Socrates has to put some distance between himself and Phaedrus as well. Otherwise, he reasons, he risks Phaedrus compelling him further.

Socrates’ plan to cross the river, which is a natural boundary, should be taken as expressing his desire to reassert his own psychic boundaries. Putting the river between Phaedrus and himself, Socrates is using a geographical border as a way of safeguarding his endangered, psychic boundaries. This is not unlike Socrates’ act of detaining Hippocrates within the enclosure of his courtyard, away from the influence of “the stranger who has arrived amongst us” in the *Protagoras*. His desire to put the river between Phaedrus and himself is motivated by a similar, but more immediate anxiety over his own exposure to *alien logoi*.

Socrates’ anxiety is understandable, for those taking possession of him have handled him roughly. While attempting to clutch at and capture him, Phaedrus and the nymphs have threatened violence; they have “struck” and “thrown” him. Socrates has suffered through divine and daemonic influences; and he has also been filled with the strange, liquid afflatuses of *alien logoi* that are beyond his control. These streams of alien discourse have flowed into him from known and unknown sources alike. It is also important to remember that it is not only Phaedrus and the nymphs who seem to have taken possession of Socrates. The number of characters striving to possess him appears equal to the number of speakers who have been cited within the text: Phaedrus, the nymphs, Sappho, Anacreon, Lysias, the gods, and so on. Socrates has every
reason to be anxious, for his and Phaedrus’ ongoing intercourse has opened him to discourses and images that push and pull him in all directions.

The anxiety that is provoked by this cacophony of voices, each struggling to possess him, is finally crystallized when Socrates formulates his need to counter the effects of his first speech with a second one. Just as Socrates seeks to put a physical buffer between Phaedrus and himself, another voice invades him. Socrates is suddenly visited by his daemon. “At the moment when I was about to cross the river,” Socrates tells Phaedrus, “there came to me a familiar divine sign… and all at once I seemed to hear a voice, forbidding me to leave the spot until I had purified myself of guilt (aphosiosomai) for some offense to heaven” (242b-c, translation modified). At this point, Socrates explains why he had suddenly abandoned his speech. Even as he delivered the speech, Socrates explains, he experienced some misgivings “lest I might, in the words of Ibycus, ‘by sinning in the sight of God win high renown from man’” (242c).

Socrates judges the significance of his offense, both in terms of the content of his speech and in terms of its possible effect. In terms of content, the speech is blasphemous and foolish (242d). If Eros is a god, he reasons, he cannot be evil as the opening two speeches implied (242e). Socrates makes some big theological assumptions here—which, incidentally, makes the gods resemble the forms as the text later conceives of them—by attributing to the gods a purity and goodness that is by no means that norm in Greek thinking. However, if it is granted that Eros is divine and that the divine is defined as excluding what is evil, then it is not only foolish and logically inconsistent to speak of Eros as the first two speeches did, it is blasphemous. The charge of blasphemy is more than a judgment of the speech’s truth value; Socrates also articulates pragmatic concerns regarding the effect of the speech. Socrates’ citation of Ibycus suggests that uttering blasphemy transforms the speaker’s relationship to men and to gods, by deceiving and winning over the former while offending the latter. Needless to say, the first two speeches also encourage the lover and his beloved to enter into the wrong sort of relationship. The consequences are not only social and theological, but also psychic.

Socrates goes on to underscore the risk that one runs when such offenses are not remedied. As he describes the possible effects of such blasphemy, he clarifies the stakes of his invasion and possession by the word of another. With a new sense of urgency, Socrates recants the speech that he has just delivered. “That was a terrible theory, Phaedrus, a terrible theory that you introduced and compelled me to expound” (242d, te ekomisas eme te anankasas eipen). Socrates not only disavows his blasphemous logos, but he disclaims any agency whatsoever in its delivery. Attributing what was said “to Lysias… (or) to that discourse of yours (Phaedrus),” he insists that any role he played was purely a product of compulsion: “You caused my lips to utter (the speech) by putting a spell (katapharmakeuthentos) on them” (242e, my emphasis). As he has claimed consistently, Socrates again insists on his passivity; he was simply the site where the logoi of others were reproduced. It was the confluence of Phaedrus’ beauty and the logoi of Lysias and the poets that acted as a drug (pharmakon), taking possession of Socrates and speaking through him. Without their influence, the speech would have remained dormant in Socrates’ breast.

Socrates has been consistent regarding his role in the speech since he first described it as welling up inside his breast after having been poured into his ears. However, it is only after the speech has completed its circuit—moving from his ears to his chest, and exiting through his mouth, where it leaves a “bitter taste” (243d)—that Socrates becomes anxious over his soul’s

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57 Here again, as Socrates interprets his divine sign, using the words of Ibycus to gain perspective on his first speech, one gets a sense of “blending” and “clashing” of quotations that occur within Socrates’ discourse.
relation to this speech. It is at this point that Socrates feels the need to “purify” (katherasthai) himself of any trace of the poisonous speech still lingering within him (243a). Socrates explains this need by reference to a literary precedent:

Now for such as offend in speaking of gods and heroes there is an ancient mode of purification (katharmos archaios) which was known to Stesichorus, though not to Homer. When Stesichorus lost the sight of his eyes because of his defamation of Helen, he was not, like Homer, at a loss to know why. As a true artist he understood the reason, and promptly (composed a recantation his previous speech)…. And after finishing the composition of his so-called palinode he straightaway recovered his sight. (243a-b)

The reference to the blindness of Homer and Stesichorus, inflicted upon them as divine punishment for defamation, identifies both the possible effect of Socrates’ transgression as well as its remedy. At the same time, the reference to Helen cannot help but to act as a reference to Gorgias’ encomium of her. For, on the one hand, Gorgias’ text is like Stesichorus’ palinode in that it rethinks the traditional portrayal of Helen. On the other hand, Gorgias’ text raises the same issues that Socrates does as he reconsiders his first speech: Gorgias thematizes the soul’s vulnerability to the word of another (a drama played out on Socrates’ body); he questions how the compulsion involved in the word of another complicates the subject’s ability to be aitios (to be a cause, to be responsible for its actions); and he traces the convergent effects of logos and eros. The allusion to Gorgias’ Helen invites us to compare Plato’s portrayal of the subject’s problematic relation to the word of another to Gorgias’ portrayal of the same problem.

Socrates’ Pathology: Socrates’ reference to the blindness of Stesichorus relies on a familiar, Platonic analogy between body and soul to explain how contamination by foreign discourses undermine the health and integrity of the soul. Socrates’ compromised body—his penetrated ears, his poisoned and possessed lips, his endangered vision—figures the threat that the foregoing discourse has put his soul under. With the help of his daemon, which is itself an incursion of sorts, Socrates realizes that this situation must be remedied, and that he cannot seek protection in silence or in distance (as when he sought to abandon his speech and cross the river). If anything, the whole opening drama of the Phaedrus, in contrast to the prologue of the Protagoras, shows that the momentary hope Socrates puts in the project of physical quarantine is ill conceived. In the Phaedrus, despite their isolation, the scene and characters are saturated with alien logoi. This experience of vulnerability and exposure appears to be a fundamental condition of the soul. Despite their differences, the Phaedrus’ suggestion that exposure to foreign logoi is inevitable dovetails nicely with the Protagoras’ characterization of logoi as what promises to nourish but also threatens to contaminate the soul. While much of my analysis has focused on the threat of contamination, the Protagoras’ portrayal of discourse as potentially nourishing not only suggests the necessity and desirability encountering it. This complicates the soul’s relation to logoi, making it much more ambivalent than if another’s discourse were simply a threat.

Socrates’ Prescription: The method for safeguarding the soul against the corrosive effects of invading voices is not flight, but a more sustained and careful intercourse with them. Thus, rather than opting for flight or silence as he is briefly tempted, Socrates hopes to follow the example of Stesichorus and to protect the integrity of his soul by “wash(ing) out (his) mouth with a draught of wholesome discourse” (243d). Because one cannot escape the relentless circulation of logoi by simply closing one’s soul to their nourishment, there is an unavoidable risk in this remedy. In attributing this ambivalence to logoi, one can again see Plato borrowing from Gorgias. Gorgias, after all, not only portrays logos as a pharmakon that can bring either health
or death (14); he also dwells on the fact that his remedy to the traditional slander of Helen is marked by the same violence to which Helen has been subjected both by Alexander and the discursive tradition that he fights. Following Gorgias’ insight that the remedy will share something in common with the disease, Socrates gives up his temptation to abandon speech altogether. In order to purify himself, he must risk continued contact with the word of another.

Still, the remedy that Plato’s Socrates proposes differs from Gorgias’ own in one very important respect. Though Gorgias and Plato both share references to the ability of logos to remedy the coercive power of another’s logos, Plato’s conception of the remedy makes a novel addition to it. While maintaining the ambivalence of the pharmakon and insisting that exposure to the word of another necessarily entails some risk, Socrates’ reference to Stesichorus imagines a logos capable of purifying the soul.

Socrates repeatedly stresses his concern with purity. In the immediate context, he insists on his need to purify himself (katharasthai) and describes Stesichorus’ palinode as an ancient mode of purification (katharmos archaios). He then goes on to thematize this capacity of speech in the introduction of his palinode. There Socrates describes the second form of divine madness as that which gives rise to rites of purification (katharmon) (244e). And given what he has said prior to beginning the speech, it is clear that the palinode should be taken as an example of such a rite. This concern is entirely out of place in Gorgias. Though, he refers to the ability of logos to “expel different humors from the body” (15), Gorgias never invokes a sense of “purity.”

But how should we understand Socrates’ search for a purifying logos? This task seems particularly strange, given that logos is depicted as something that traverses boundaries, as something that breaks in on one from the outside; so, what can it mean to find a logos that purifies and reestablishes boundaries? It seems as if what Socrates desires of logos is an effect that runs counter to its nature as he has characterized it thus far. If logos generally appears to act as something that disrupts psychic boundaries, disperses the subject, and subjects him to another’s will, it is an open question as to whether there are any logos that are capable of fostering the opposite effects. Indeed, can it even be taken for granted that those are the effects that purification would entail? Is it possible, for instance, to effect a consolidation of the subject, a shoring up of his boundaries, without also subjecting him to the power of another?

We can clarify what Plato’s call for purification entails by turning briefly to Gorgias’ response to their shared problem. Both thinkers are responding to the threat of compulsion that is carried by the word of another. However, the difficulties associated with purification do not arise for Gorgias, because he never hints at the possibility of escaping the influence others’ speech. Gorgias aims at an end that is different from that of Plato’s Socrates. There is no overarching question of purification for him; there is no plan of elude the grasp of others and their discourses. Rather, Gorgias’ examination of the speech situation, through which tradition is reproduced, underscores the inevitability of its hold on the subject. This is why Gorgias does so much to implicate his own practice in a set of power relations like those inhabited by Alexander and Helen, on the one hand, and the poets and their audiences, on the other. The struggle with the word of another, for Gorgias, is not something that can be escaped. One is never freed from the demands of tradition.

This does not mean that one is completely helpless. Like Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, Gorgias seems to find a resource in the heteroglossal character of language. Like Bakhtin and Barthes, Gorgias’ exploration of the power of tradition depicts “the boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own… (as) flexible, ambiguous… distorted and
confused.” The consequence of this, for Bakhtin, is that any given discourse though it “presumes to be completely unified,” always contains heterogenous and conflicting elements. Any given discourse, expressing a given understanding of the world, is constituted by other discourses, which carry conflicting understandings and demands. Though, at times discursive traditions become more or less “single-voiced,” they inevitably contain to “other” discourses and possibilities. The discourses that circulate about Helen offer a perfect example of this. Though Gorgias says that everyone is “of the same voice and mind” (2, homophonos kai homopsychos), he is still able to invoke a number of different traditional discourses to counter that monologism. Because they are never singular, the great variety of conflicting demands that traditions make of the subject ultimately, for Gorgias, becomes a resource. One discourse can be played against another, as the lyric poets’ portrayals of desire are played against the traditional condemnation of Helen, in order to open creative, new perspectives and possibilities.

This sort of creative appropriation of tradition, however, hardly seems to work towards “purity.” If anything, the strategic embrace of a wide variety of discourses would seem to produce an increasingly motley subject—a Typhon—not the purer, “tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature” that Socrates desires to be (230a). One gets the sense that if Plato has abandoned the hope of avoiding contact with foreign logoi altogether, he still holds on to the hope that engagement with them could open the possibility of escape from them.

At this point, we have a better understanding of what a purifying discourse is not. However, we have still not determined what exactly a purifying discourse is or how to distinguish it from one that contaminates the soul. In order to get to the bottom of this issue, we will have to more fully work out the conjunction of logos and eros, which this chapter has only begun to plot. The next two chapters will examine how the palinode portrays the conjunction of desire and discourse in order show how it answers the question of what constitutes a purifying discourse.

Bakhtin 1981. 69. Barthes abandons the concept of “one’s own” discourse altogether. “The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as to never rest on any one of them” (146).
Chapter Three: Plato’s Erotics – Purifying Discourses, Purifying Desires

What the drama surrounding Socrates’ first speech in the *Phaedrus* suggests is that exposure to the word of another opens the subject to contamination and violence. Alien *logoi* invade the soul, carrying with them foreign intentions that press it into undesirable relationships. How can one respond to this threat? If flight, which is Socrates’ initial response, is not an option; then it is tempting to suppose that a purifying discourse would be one that constituted a pure expression or invention of the author. This temptation may be greater for the modern (post-Romantic) reader than it was in Plato’s Athens, where audiences were accustomed to the poet’s attribution of his words to the muses at the start of his work. Nevertheless, Plato has Socrates head off this potential misinterpretation. As Socrates begins his act of purification he disrupts that expectation. Socrates not only cites Stesichorus as precedent for his rite of purification (243a-b), but he actually attributes the purifying discourse to Stesichorus as well. “Whereas the preceding discourse was by Phaedrus, son of Pythocles, of Myrhinus,” Socrates tells his hypothetical beloved, “that which I shall now pronounce is by Stesichorus, son of Euphemus, of Himera” (243e-244a). Once again refusing to be counted as author of his speech, Socrates complicates any attempt to distinguish a purifying discourse from a polluting one based simply upon origins, for the discourse by which Socrates would purify himself is also not his own.

A purifying discourse cannot be characterized as originating exclusively in the speaking subject. Nightingale puts the matter well, “There can be any number of *logoi* in a person’s soul which have not been “discovered”: these are, of course, internal “aliens.” Authentic discourse, by contrast is “discovered” in Plato’s special sense of this word. It is not invented or created by the soul but rather found in the process of recollecting the Forms” (168). There is a difference between Nightingale’s terms and my own, and it is more than terminological. I am sympathetic to Nightingale’s reading, but where she speaks of “authentic discourse,” I strive to maintain the terms that Plato uses—nourishing (*trepho*), purifying (*kathairo*), and so on—in order to focus on the psychic processes these describe rather than their product (“authentic discourse” vs. “internal ‘aliens’”). I do think that Nightingale is correct to insist that invention is not the issue and that she points us in the right direction. However, more needs to be said about what this process of “discovery”—understood as “nourishment” or “purification”—entails.

Nightingale provides some interesting hints as to what one should make of the process of purification. For instance, she describes the subject as being “continually… confronted by new *logoi*, which must… be naturalized or deported” (169). This clearly picks up on the need that Socrates expresses to safeguard the integrity of his soul by expelling foreign discourses. At the same time, Nightingale’s recognition that it is sometimes appropriate to “naturalize” the foreign word registers the ambivalent nature of the soul’s relation to discourse. This is dramatized by Socrates’ use of Stesichorus’ *logos* to expel that of Lysias.59 However, aside from a brief, and somewhat undeveloped, reference to the recollection of the forms, Nightingale says very little regarding how purification (the choice between “naturalization” and “deportation”) takes place.

In this chapter and the next, I look to Socrates’/Stesichorus’ palinode to answer the question of what makes a discourse purifying. What does the process of purification entail? And how can a discourse that originates from elsewhere, like Stesichorus’ *palinode*, work to

59 Socrates not only confronts a similar problem in the Cratylus, but the solution takes a similar form. After describing how Euthyphro’s “wisdom and enchanting ravishment have not only filled my ears but taken possession of my soul,” Socrates decides, “tomorrow… we will conjure him away, and make a purgation of him, if we can only find some priest or Sophist who is skilled in purifications of this sort” (396e). Socrates not only seeks purification, but he requires another’s discourse, some priest’s or sophist’s, in order to accomplish it.
purify the soul of the speaker who repeats it? If a discourse is not deemed purifying or contaminating based upon whether its origin can be traced back to the soul of the speaking subject, then how does one determine which discourses nourish the soul and which threaten it? I will return to Nightingale’s suggestion that the forms play a role in this process, for I also believe they are relevant. However, first, it is important to more closely examine the conjunction of _eros_ and _logos_ that this analysis has only hinted at so far.

To that end, this chapter will look at how Socrates’ speech collapses the distinction between rhetoric and erotics. By examining how Socrates attempts to absorb the work of rhetoric into erotics (read: philosophy), we can come to understand how he assimilates the subject’s experience—its _pathe_, passion—of _logos_ to its experience of images, beauty and desire. That is to say, we will see how Socrates assimilates the subject’s experience of _logos_ to its erotic experience. This assimilation of the _pathe of logos_ to the _pathe of eros_ will not only establish a parallel between erotics’ and rhetoric’s respective objects, discourse and desire, it will yoke both practices to a common ideal to be actualized in the soul. It is after all, as Socrates will make clear, in conjunction with the soul that these arts study their objects. The palinode will describe the end of rhetoric and erotics both as returning the soul to itself—not its empirical self, but an ideal self that is projected back into myth. Thus, we will see, the question of whether a discourse is purifying or polluting does not turn on its personal origins, but instead upon its psychic effect. A “purifying discourse” is one that overcomes the rift that separates the empirical subject, who speaks here and now, from his ideal self as he was and should be (represented in myth).

The next two chapters will unpack and specify this basic function of a purifying discourse by looking at how Socrates constitutes the fields of erotics and rhetoric. I start by examining the tasks that he assigns to each practice as well as the difficulties and limits that each encounters. A particular difficulty that Socrates confronts, on which I linger, is how to define the soul and the role that images play in such discussions. Socrates confronts this difficulty at the start of his discussion of erotic madness. Describing the soul, Socrates says, “as to its form (ideas) there is this that must be said. What manner of thing it is (oion men esti) would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it” (246a). Socrates’ palinode appears ready to founder on this difficulty even before it is underway. However, Socrates overcomes it by approaching the soul analogically, employing likenesses of it (ho de eoiken, what it resembles), rather than attempting to definitively describe the soul’s form. The solution, however, raises further difficulties. In particular, how can one judge the truth of these likenesses if one does not know the object they are said to approximate? The text’s failure to answer the question that it so obviously raises, I argue, suggests a certain pragmatic streak to Plato’s philosophy. That is, at times, Plato develops more pragmatic criteria for judging images, which have more to do with their (transformative) effect on the soul than with their verisimilitude.

With this criterion in hand, I will return to the images that Socrates uses to describe the soul’s experience of _eros_, arguing, on the one hand, that the same receptacle analogy that he uses to describe his invasion by _logos_ also provides an image of his invasion by _eros_. (In chapter four, I examine the myth’s famous chariot image and argue that this image has to be understood in terms of how it directs the erotic transformation of the subject). Given the collapse of rhetoric into erotics, it turns out that the question regarding _logos_ will be the same as the question about images: What is its effect on the soul? How does the image of _logos_ transform the soul by transforming the relationships that it enters into?

First, however, this chapter begins by examining the genealogy of Socrates’ palinode. The genealogy of Stesichorus, the father of Socrates’ speech, will prepare the ground for
understanding the end towards which a purifying discourse strives. The fact that a genealogy is provided at all also suggests that this end is bound up with the issue of origins. That is to say, the palinode’s genealogy anticipates its myth in suggesting that the question of a speech’s origins, where it comes from, is bound up with the question of its end, where it goes.

The Genealogy of Stesichorus'/Socrates’ Speech

Though the immediate origin of a speech does not determine whether it is purifying, the Phaedrus suggests that origins are not wholly irrelevant. The proper origin of purifying or nourishing discourses, however, is not a personal matter. Rather, the genealogy that Socrates provides will stress that the purifying potential of logos depends upon the relationship that the speech maintains between the speaking subject and the subject’s proper object of desire. It is in this relation, between speech and desire, the forms will play a key role.

The proper relation between speech and desire can be clarified by examining the genealogy that Socrates furnishes for his second speech. “(The speech) I shall now pronounce,” Socrates declares, “is by Stesichorus, son of Euphemus, of Himera” (244a). The historical record of Stesichorus is thin, so it is unclear how much of this genealogy constitutes the facts as Plato understood them and how much of it is his own invention. Regardless, Plato is clearly playing with the homophonic intersections between Stesichorus’ lineage and his dialogue’s thematic interest in rhetoric and erotics. Socrates exploits the genealogical convention of identifying a person according to two origins, his father and his place of birth, in order to hint at the connection between speaking well and desiring properly. The origin of Socrates’ speech, Stesichorus, is traced to two further origins. First, Stesichorus is identified along patronymic lines. Euphemus, the name of Stesichorus’ father, is derived from the verb euphemeo, which can refer either to the “uttering of sounds of good omen” or to “the observance of religious silence.” Both usages of euphemeo, of course, directly answer Socrates’ need to purify himself of blasphemy. Indeed, what better way to counter blasphemy than with some euphemy? At the same time, the etymological components of the name Euphemus—speaking-well—indicate that he will be the logical source of a properly constituted rhetoric. Fathered by Stesichorus and grandchild of Eu-phemus, the palinode’s lineage is anything but irrelevant.

The geographical origin of the speech’s father provides material for punning as well. Stesichorus is said to be “of Himera” (Himeraiou). That is, he is from the Sicilian city of Himera, which is named after himeros, “longing, yearning after, desire or love.” Thus, in the character of Stesichorus, the “origin” of Socrates’ speech, the two major themes of the Phaedrus,

60 In this respect, I am in fundamental agreement with Marina McCoy. The philosopher’s desire is the definitive quality of his persona and his speech, “The philosopher’s love of the forms affects how he speaks to others – ultimately, in order to guide others to love and to seek the forms as well” (McCoy 6). I could not agree more. However, I do think that in her attempt to offer a corrective to what she sees as an all too narrow focus on questions of method, McCoy misses the opportunity to see how the form of the question and the rules of dialectic work to foster the psychic and erotic orientation that she describes.

61 Ann L. T. Bergren notes that “Cicero (Rep. 2.20) records a tradition that Stesichorus was Hesiod’s grandson; Tzetzes in his Life of Hesiod (18) says that Aristotle made him Hesiod’s son, but that ‘this Stesichorus was a contemporary of Pythagoras and Phalaris’” (93). Anne L. T. Bergren, “Language & the Feminine in Early Greek Thought,” Arethusa 16.1/2, 1983: 69-95. Other sources also say Euphemus is Stesichorus’ father, but they are much later may be drawing on Plato’s text. See David A. Campbell, Greek Lyric III: Stesichorus, Ibycus, Simonides and Others, Loeb Classical Library, 1991, 29. In any case, the historical veracity of this claim is beside the point, especially since Socrates is so dismissive of historical investigations elsewhere in the Phaedrus (229c-230a).


63 Ibid. 380.
rhetoric and erotics, are knit together: Coming from the land of desire, Stesichorus possesses his father’s skill in speech. Presumably, this means that Stesichorus has not only passed on his skill in speech, but has also transmitted his originary desire to the discourse that he has engendered.

Martha Nussbaum also notices the significance of the palinode’s genealogy. Noting the meaning of Stesichorus’ father’s name and his place of origin, she observes that “Plato repeatedly puns on the significance of actual names both in this dialogue and elsewhere.” Nussbaum also observes that Socrates puns on the meaning of Phaedrus’ name (“bright, shining”) when he comments on the way that he seemed to “light up” (γανυσθαι) while delivering Lysias’ speech (234d). However, Nussbaum does not explore the significance of the palinode’s genealogy much beyond the observation that Euphemus’ name reflects the tone of the palinode as Himeros reflects its topic (211). It behooves us to push the issue further. I propose that we read the palinode’s genealogy in light of the palinode’s description of eros.

Desire and discourse are closely paired, not only in the story of Stesichorus’ origins but also in the logos attributed to him. We have just seen how Stesichorus’ genealogy joins these concerns. Structurally, within the dialogue, the reference to the genealogy mediates a move from the rhetorical concerns that dominate the interludes between Socrates’ speeches to the erotic concerns of the palinode itself. As Socrates reflects on the rhetoric of the first two speeches, he uses Stesichorus as a model of what it is to “speak well” regarding the gods. An image of his father, Stesichorus supplies Socrates with model of how to respond to the practical exigency that he faces: Stesichorus supplies him with an antidote—a euphemous speech—to fortify his soul against the corrupting influence of the blasphemous one. Naturally, the response shifts the discussion from rhetoric back to Eros, the object of Lysias’ blasphemy. However, the turn back to erotics does not constitute a turn away from rhetoric. The rhetorical need for a wholesome discourse is not only met by the palinode, but the palinode will also describe the conditions that a wholesome discourse would meet. This is just as much a rhetorical concern as it is an erotic one. The palinode’s description of proper erotics, it turns out, will also describe proper rhetoric.

It behooves us, lest one think this idle word play, to note how the genealogy anticipates the rest of the palinode. At the heart of the palinode is the myth that describes a heavenly procession, in which all souls are said to participate. All souls, divine and mortal, are arranged in a “divine chorus” (247a, theiou chorou, my translation). This chorus is divided, so that the

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64 Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck & Ethics in Greek Tragedy & Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986 (211, fn 23). There are numerous instances in which Socrates puns on names: Pollus, the “young colt” is “youthful and impulsive” (*Gorgias* 463e); the name of Diotima of Mantinea means literally, Zeus-honored (or Halperin’s “Prophetess from Prophetsville”); the *Gorgias*’ Callicles, whose inconsistency is tied to his love of Demos and the *demos* (481d), seems to fit his “bitter” name, and so forth.

65 The relationship between Stesichorus, his father, and Socrates seems to mirror the relationship that the palinode will later describe between lovers, their gods, and their beloveds. As part of his erotic practice, Socrates says, the lover will “pattern himself” on his god (253b, mimoumenoi autoi) (the subject is plural because Socrates describes the class of lovers), such that he provides the beloved with an image of the god that he can imitate himself. “Bringing the beloved to be every whit like unto himself and unto the god they worship (all εις homoioteta autois kai to theo... agein)” (253b-c), Socrates says, the beloved is made to approximate his god by approximating his lover just as Socrates seems to approximate Euphemus by repeating the words of Stesichorus. This reading of the genealogy is reinforced by the etymology of Stesichorus’ name (“the one who establishes a chorus”), which anticipates the palinode’s description of the divine procession, where each god is described as leading a “divine chorus” (247a, theiou chorou). Insofar as the lover “leads” his beloved to follow his god—an act which takes place primarily through logos—he acts as a chorus leader, directing his beloved back to his original motion/dance. Insofar as Plato’s Socrates develops a new form of desire and a new sort of community, one might say that he is establishing a new chorus, a new dance.
souls each follow the Olympian with whom they have an affinity; and the gods lead them to the top of the heavens, where the forms dwell. The forms are described both as the true object of desire and as the soul’s true nourishment (250b, 247e), so the soul is “pure” in their presence (250c). The myth not only identifies the proper object of the soul’s desire (the forms), describing them as what maintains the soul in a state of purity, but Socrates describes the vision of the forms as the foundation of all logos. “Only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into our human form—seeing that man must needs understand the language of the forms, passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning” (249b-c). I will have more to say of this in chapters four and five, but it is worth noting that the way that the palinode’s concerns regarding eros and logos converge.

The essential function of logos is to recover the soul’s erotic vision, after it is embodied and its original pursuit of the forms has been perverted. To “speak well” (euphemeo), then is to fulfill this function of logos. To speak well is to speak in such a way as to return the soul to its original desire—to its original Himeros, laid out in the mythic topos. By repeating Stesichorus’ speech, Socrates seeks to repeat the union of desire and logos that is embodied in its author and described in his speech; and in this way, the palinode reverses the course of Lysias’ praise of the non-lover, which severs that union. Moreover, to the extent that Socrates’ repetition of Stesichorus’, the chorus-founder’s, speech affects its aim of reorienting the soul to its original object of desire, he becomes a sort of stesi-chorus himself. To the extent that it is successful, Socrates’ speech reestablishes a chorus of speaker and auditor, lover and beloved, who return to their dance towards the forms.

What Stesichorus’ genealogy suggests is that it is the relationship between logos and eros that will distinguish nourishing discourses from noxious ones. This should sound familiar, for as we saw in the Gorgias, the “true political art” that Socrates claims for himself is distinguished from its dangerous, flattering double (rhetoric) by the relationships of their respective discourses to desire. Recall that according to Socrates, the logos of the true politician will not cater to any desire whatsoever, but will correct and redirect the interlocutor’s desire towards “what is best” (to beltiston). It may sound contradictory to claim that the genealogy’s suggested union of desire and good discourse fits with the Gorgias’ description of the potential antagonism between the philosopher’s discourse and his interlocutor’s desire. However, by tracing origin of logos and eros back to the same event in the mythic prehistory of the soul, the palinode will not only suggest their original union; but it will also provide both discourse and desire with a proper end. The antagonism that the Gorgias describes occurs when eros and logos go errant, deviating from their prescribed path back to their original object. As David M. Halperin has suggested in “Platonic Eros and What Men Call Desire,” “Desire for… Plato… is transferential in the Freudian sense: It is shaped by a primary object choice and displaced from an originary object onto substitutes for it (‘surrogates’) that resemble it generically” (168). It is this deviation or displacement that the purifying discourse addresses. By describing the original union of discourse and desire, the palinode clarifies the conditions that a purifying discourse must meet. Namely, a purifying discourse would work to restore the original unity of discourse and desire by redirecting both to the forms.

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66 Here we can draw another connection between Gorgias and Phaedrus. The Gorgias does not mention “the forms” as such, but in addition to distinguishing philosophical discourse (dialectic) from its competitors by its relationship to desire, Socrates also distinguishes philosophy by its object (to beltiston, not hedone). In chapter one, I noted that the good operates by a different logic than pleasure. Where the other is inconsistent, fluctuating and prone to mixture (i.e., pleasure coincides with pain), the good was identical to itself, abstract and operates according
In addition to uniting discourse and desire in their origin and end, the palinode reinforces the connection between eros and logos by using the same image of the soul to imagine its relationship to both. The same analogy, the soul-as-receptacle, that Socrates uses to envision his invasion by foreign logoi, also describes soul’s experience of erotic passion. Again, the soul is figured as a receptacle, with openings that make it penetrable by foreign substances, however, rather than being penetrated by flows of alien discourse, the boundaries of the soul are traversed by fluxes of desire and beauty. Moreover, as in the prologue of the Protagoras, Socrates stresses that this receptacle, the soul, is inevitably transformed by what it receives. Thus, we will see, the proper use of logos not only derives from the origin it shares with eros, but the mechanics of eros will be described according to the same model as logos. Finally, the palinode will judge the significance of logos and eros both in terms of their effect upon the soul.

THE PALINODE AS A RHETORIC

In his palinode, Socrates sets out to purify himself and to atone for his blasphemy against Eros by countering the first two speeches’ slander of the lover. Socrates does so, not by denying the charge that the lover is mad, but instead recuperates the value of certain types of madness. The first two speeches would be right, Socrates explains, “if it were an invariable truth that madness is an evil, but in reality, the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent” (244a). Socrates counts erotic desire as the foremost of four species of divine madness. He describes the other forms—prophecy, madness that gives rise to rites of purification (katharmon) and poetry—by way of introduction to his account of erotic madness (244b-245b). The treatment of these species is cursory, he recognizes (245b), but it provides enough reason to reconsider the lover’s situation.

At this point, Socrates arrives at the main concern of his argument, and he explicitly marks the transition to the main body of the speech by reflecting on what his palinode needs to accomplish. “Now our first step toward attaining the truth of (erotic madness),” he states, “is to discern the nature of the soul (psyches phuseos), divine and human, its passions (pathē), and its activities (erga). Here then our proof begins” (245c, translation modified). Socrates’ commentary on what his speech must accomplish interrupts the flow of his speech rather abruptly. Socrates’ commentary marks a division, separating his treatment of erotic madness from other forms of divine madness while introducing and setting off his definition of the soul as “that which moves itself” (245c). I will return to this definition shortly, but, first it is important to note how Socrates’ definition of erotics anticipates and subsumes his definition of rhetoric.

The Task of Erotics, the Task of Rhetoric:

Socrates’ commentary on his task not only alerts us as to what to expect from the speech, but it sets the agenda for his erotics. That is to say, it defines the route that must be taken in order to get at the truth of desire: A good erotic discourse, Socrates insists, must begin by defining the soul; then it should describe the passions and actions of the soul. This statement will guide the rest of the palinode. However, the full importance of this commentary can only be understood after the speech is complete, because only then does Socrates specify what he demands of a proper rhetoric. When Socrates explicitly turns his attention to rhetoric, we see that his definition of the task of erotics has anticipated and subsumed his treatment of rhetoric.

The demands that Socrates makes of an “art of rhetoric” repeat, almost verbatim, the demands that he makes of his erotic discourse. What Socrates says his erotic speech must set out to mutual exclusions (i.e., the good does not mix with the bad). In many ways, by tying logos and eros back to the forms, which exhibit the characteristics attributed to to beltiston, the Phaedrus formalizes the relation between desire, discourse and the soul that the Gorgias describes.
to discern, (1) the nature of the soul (*psyches phuseos*) and (2) its passions (*pathe*) and actions (*erga*), is precisely what he demands any serious “art of rhetoric” to describe (271a, *techne* *rhetoriken*).

(1) “In the first place,” Socrates says, a rhetoric must, “describe the soul very precisely, and let us see (*poiesei psychen idein*) whether it is single and uniform in nature or, analogous to the body, complex (*polueides*)” (271a).\(^{67}\) The first demand that Socrates makes of rhetoric—that it “see” (*idein*) the soul, to see whether it is one (en) or complex (poly-eides, many-formed)—directly echoes the palinode’s first task of “discerning” (*noesai*) or “seeing” (*idonta*) the nature of the soul. While this first rhetorical task, with its question of the soul’s form, may seem more elaborate than the erotic task of defining the nature of the soul, what we will see when we take a closer look at Socrates’ erotic discourse, is that he comes to ask this same question. After offering an initial definition of the soul as self-motion (245c-d), Socrates’ discourse comes to describe its form (246a). So, as Socrates pursues the agenda of his erotic discourse, the slight difference between the tasks of his erotic and rhetorical discourses is effaced. On the other hand, as Socrates clarifies what he demands of rhetoric, he even more closely approximates his statement regarding what his erotic discourse must accomplish. He insists that to make the soul visible in this way—to articulate its form—will amount “to show(ing)… (its) nature” (271a, *phusin einai deiknuna*). Thus, the first task of rhetoric, to envision the soul, coincides precisely with the first task that Socrates lays out for his palinode. Rhetoric and erotics both begin by revealing the “nature” (*phusis*) of the soul.

(2) The second task that Socrates sets for an epistemic rhetoric also coincides with his prescription for the palinode. “Secondly,” Socrates continues, “(rhetoric) will reveal what it (the soul) naturally does (*poiein*) to what and what it naturally suffers (*pathein*) from what” (271a, my emphasis).\(^{68}\) The resemblance to Socrates’ definition of the task of the palinode is hard to miss. The reference to what the soul suffers (*pathein*) uses the same term as Socrates’ insistence on the need for the palinode to describe the *pathe* of the soul. The reference to what the soul does (*poiein*) departs from the language of Socrates’ reflection on the need to describe soul’s “activities” (*erga*), but the departure is slight.

Socrates’ definition of the conditions that the art of rhetoric must satisfy reveals that the task of his erotic discourse coincides almost entirely with the task of developing a proper rhetoric. This is not to say that Socrates’ prescription for the palinode conforms in every respect to the demands that he sets down for rhetoric. It is worth noting that Socrates articulates a third condition that rhetoric must satisfy if it is to be a *techne*, which is not explicitly anticipated by his erotic agenda. “Thirdly, (the rhetorician) will classify the types of discourse and the types of soul (*ta logon te kai psyches gene*), and the various ways in which souls are affected (*pathemata*), explaining the *aitias* (reason, causes) in each case, (and) suggesting the type of speech appropriate to each type of soul” (271b). This condition prevents the identification of rhetoric with erotics from being complete. Unlike the first two conditions, there is nothing in the palinode’s erotic agenda that anticipates to this particular demand. Still, the palinode does not neglect this set of concerns entirely. It actually does begin to develop a typology that characterizes different types of human souls according to which god they followed in the divine procession and how much truth they saw there (252c-253b, 248c-e). Furthermore, the palinode

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\(^{67}\) Though more abstract, this echoes Socrates’ early question about his own soul, and whether he is more complex (*poluplokoteron*) than a Typhon or a “simpler, tamer creature” (230a).

describes the soul’s “type” as bearing directly upon how it is affected (pathemata) by beauty, desire and logoi. For example, while the soul that followed Zeus bears the burden of love “with some constancy,” the follower of Ares reacts to the beauty of his beloved quite violently (252c).

In fact, though the initial agenda that Socrates sets for the palinode does not explicitly mention the third condition that he demands of rhetoric, one could describe it as implied in his call to describe the soul’s passions and actions. G. R. F. Ferrari makes this point, “This… (task) is really an extension of the second requirement – that the orator know what the soul affects and is affected by – made specific to speech…. The core of the method is in its first two requirements.”

The concern with how the soul is affected by logoi simply identifies one of many possible problems within a more encompassing task of exploring the pathe and erga of the soul. Understanding the third condition as arising out of the second preserves a distinct identity for rhetoric while situating it within a wider domain of erotic concerns.

By placing the same demands on both arts, Socrates effectively makes rhetoric a species of erotics. It is not surprising then that the palinode’s exploration of erotics tends to spill over into the rhetorical domain. The palinode not only describes how the soul becomes capable of speech and how logos works in relation to the senses, but it also preserves a central place for logos within the erotic practice. This overlap arises directly out of Socrates’ definition of both practices. If rhetoric is the discourse that elaborates what the soul suffers (pathe) with regard to logos, it is a discourse that arises quite naturally out of the more general erotic exploration of the erga and pathe of the soul.

THE NATURE OF THE SOUL: Imaging its Form

As Socrates takes his first steps toward attaining the truth of erotic madness, he obeys his self-imposed demand and attempts to discern the nature of the soul (psyches phuseos). Initially, Socrates appears to sever the task of discerning the nature of the soul from the related task of looking (idonta) at its passions and its actions. However, his first effort at revealing the nature of the soul is not very revealing; and Socrates finds it necessary to supplement this approach with a discussion of the pathe and erga of the soul and with an analogical discourse that represents the soul through “likenesses” (eoiken).

The difficulties that Socrates encounters in his attempt to discern the nature of the soul raises questions about how to represent it: On the one hand, one must pose the question of how one should understand the relationship between Socrates’ effort to discern the nature of the soul and his effort to describe its pathe and erga. Are these tasks different or the same? On the other hand, one has to consider the specific epistemic difficulties involved in studying the soul. How is the soul made manifest? How does one get a “look” (idonta) at it? And, if the soul is something that tests the limits of our knowledge, as Socrates suggests (246a, 246c-d), then how are we to know it and how are we to judge our claims to knowledge about it? In particular, how can one judge “likenesses” of the soul if one does not already know the truth of the soul itself?

I will turn to these questions soon, but first it is necessary recount Socrates’ initial attempt to discern the nature of the soul. Socrates begins by defining the soul as self-motion, and arguing that this makes the soul immortal. “All soul is immortal, for that which is ever in motion is immortal. But that which while imparting motion is itself moved by something else can cease to be in motion” (245c-d). Socrates goes on to affirm that he has revealed “precisely… the essence and definition of the soul… (is) self-motion” (245e, pephasmou tou uph’ heautou

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kinoumenou, psyches ousian te kai logon auton tis legon). Socrates’ definition of the soul proves relevant to erotics, but its implications are not immediately clear. In fact, the definition appears rather arbitrary, and in any case, it does not seem to reveal the essence of the soul as successfully as Socrates suggests. Moreover, while Socrates claims to have revealed the nature of the soul, his definition does not allow for the “look” (idonta) at its erga and pathe that he has called for. In fact, this passage hardly provides anything at all resembling an image of the soul.

The difficulties of this passage have not escaped notice. In *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, Charles Griswold notes that here Socrates suddenly introduces “(an) air of logical rigor,” which had been absent from his previous descriptions of divine madness (78). Griswold also points out that the passage is not only exceedingly abstract, but that it does not provide any examples of self-motion. He ventures a hypothesis as to why this is so:

The perception required to state the essence of the human and divine soul would seem to transcend human powers; indeed, to try to state the essence of the divine seems hubristic. Perhaps this is why so little is said in the passage about the soul beyond the assertion that the soul is immortal self-motion…. Describing the soul that is common to gods and men requires an abstraction from the body as well as from the human world and the familiar human conception of the gods. (Griswold 80)

Griswold’s explanation of the abstract character of this passage is well founded. The concern with hubris is not only grounded in Socrates’ desire to purify himself of blasphemy, but the concern is raised again by Socrates’ comment that to describe the soul’s form (ideas) would be a task for a god (246a). More importantly, Griswold does not note, but the need that he postulates of conceiving of the soul in isolation from the body, the human world, and the familiar conception of the gods follows from a warning that Socrates gives about the confusion that attends psychological discussions. This warning follows the initial definition of the soul.

**THE DANGER OF IMAGES**

Socrates’ diagnosis of the confusion that haunts discussions of the soul also acts as a warning about the danger of images more generally. This warning, appropriately enough, is voiced just as Socrates abandons his abstract, definitional approach to the soul in favor of an analogical, image-based discourse. This will leave us in a bit of a quandary as to just what to make of Socrates’ analogical discourse, but I will return to that issue soon. First, it is important to establish what Socrates’ critique of images is.

According to Socrates, there is a confusion that haunts discussions of the soul, and images play a key role in this confusion. Socrates explains this difficulty by examining the terms that are variously applied to the soul in theological discussions. Though the context is theological, it is important to keep in mind that the implications of the discussion are psychological. The issue that Socrates grapples with cuts to the heart of the palinode, the question is how to represent the soul. By giving brief definitions of the terms that are used to discuss the soul and looking at their use, Socrates identifies a contradiction in the conventional Greek conception of the gods. The problem, he says, is that everyone speaks of the gods as “immortal, living beings,” but this phrase is contradictory. Socrates explains:

This composite structure of soul and body is called a “living being” (zoon), and is further termed “mortal”; but “immortal” is a term applied on no basis of reasoned argument (oud’ ... logou lelogismenou). Although we can neither see (idontes) nor conceive (noesantes) of a god sufficiently, we fashion (plattomen) him
nonetheless as an immortal, living being (*athanaton ti zoon*), having a soul and a body, united for all time (*sumpephukota*). (246c-d)

According to Socrates, the facts are as follows: A “living being” (*zoon*) is composed of “mortal” and “immortal” parts, the body and the soul. However, while the soul is immortal, the living being is “mortal” by definition because the death of the body dissolves the whole (“the composite structure”). When the body dies, the soul persists but the *zoon* is no more. Yet, Socrates explains, our discourses persist in imagining the gods as this union of body and soul.

What instigates this confusion is an epistemological problem. Socrates stresses, we “can neither see (*idontes*) nor… conceive (*noesantes*)” of the gods. We lack a vision of the truth about the gods to ground our theology, so our discourses become unmoored. This state of affairs is especially problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, our ignorance of the gods makes it difficult to judge when our discourses are appropriate and when they go astray. As a result, Socrates is unable to directly appeal to the truth of the gods in order to condemn traditional theology. Instead, he must shift the discussion towards an examination of theology’s *logos* in order to expose the inconsistency of its terms (as he construes them).

More importantly, our lack of vision (*idontes*) of the gods, and of souls generally, proves problematic for Socrates because it is just this vision of the soul that Socrates’ erotic speech is supposed to deliver. “Our first step toward attaining the truth of the matter,” Socrates had said, “is to see (*idonta*) the nature of the soul, divine and human, and to conceive (*noesai*) of its passions and actions” (245c). The repetition of the pair of verbs—*to see* (*eidon/idonta*) and *to conceive* (*noesai*) of the soul—helps to underscore continuity of the task that Socrates assigns himself with the task that conventional Greek theology leaves undone (we “neither see (*idontes*) nor… conceive (*noesantes*)” the gods). It remains to be seen, however whether Socrates can succeed where he says traditional theology fails.

Indeed, Socrates himself gives us reason to doubt whether he can overcome the epistemological difficulty on which traditional theology founders. Leading up to his definition of *zoon* (living being), Socrates indicates why people are tempted to introduce the body into discussions of the soul. The temptation is that the body provides an image of an otherwise invisible soul. Anticipating his description of the heavenly procession of souls and of the soul’s movement between bodies, Socrates says, “All soul has the care of all that is inanimate, and traverses the whole universe, *though in ever-changing forms* (*alloi eides eignomene*)” (246b, my emphasis). What tempts us to speak of the soul as forever joined to a body is that the

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71 Translation modified. For the first part of this passage, I have used the Hackforth translation, because it conveys the manner in which Socrates examines the definitions of the various terms in order to get at the contradiction. However, for the end of the passage, I have preferred Stephen Scully’s translation. Partially, this preference arises out of the readability of Scully’s translation. More importantly, however, Scully remains more faithful to the Greek. In particular, Scully avoids introducing the anachronistic, psychological concept of “fancy.” In place of Hackforth’s “our fancy pictures the god,” Scully writes, “we fashion (*plattomen*) the god,” which is not only more faithful to the Greek, but it maintains a connection to the language of fabrication, which will play an important role in Socrates’ discussion of the erotic relationship. The lover and his beloved are said to remake or refashion themselves on the model of their god (252d-253c). Scully also points out that Plato might be taken as punning on his name (*Plato/plattomen*). This is a particularly interesting place for such a pun to appear, since it would implicate Plato in the dangerous practice of image-production that he has Socrates warn about. Moreover, the fact that the verb *plattomen*, used here to describe the production of images of the gods, is connected to the language of fabrication that the palinode later uses to describe the transformation of the lover—where it describes the lover as being fashioned to approximate the image of his god—indicates that the stakes of this discussion are ultimately *ethopoetic*. The images that we fashion of the gods end up providing the model, whose image we try to bring out in ourselves.
soul only becomes visible (*eidesi*\(^{72}\)) through the body. “The ever-changing forms (of the soul)” of Hackforth’s translation might also be rendered, “(the soul) becomes different in different images (looks, forms or appearances)” or “(the soul) is born into different images.” Whether *gignomai* is translated as birth or becoming, it is clear that when the soul assumes different images (*eidesi*) a living being is born. Anticipating the palinode’s account of *metempsychosis*, the passage describes the soul’s various incarnations as its entrance into varied appearances (*eidesi*). What gives the soul a *look* and makes it visible are the bodies, the images that it dons.

This motivates the confusion that Socrates diagnoses. Socrates seems to suggest that people fashion (*plattomen*) such images of gods and of souls—yoking them to bodies—in an attempt to understand what they cannot see. Because the body provides an image of the soul without which it is impossible to envision, we think of the soul in terms of the body. To the extent that images might help us overcome our ignorance, they would seem beneficial, but they are haunted by a two-fold danger: First of all, as is the case in traditional theology, images seem to encourage the inquirer to confuse the attributes of different objects with one another, substituting the qualities of the body for those of the soul. At the same time, images threaten to lure the inquirer into a false sense of knowledge, so that one talks as if one’s discourse is reasoned—as if it is based upon a sufficient vision (*idonta*, *eidesi*) or conception (*noesantes*) of the object—when it is not. So, images threaten to absorb our attention, preventing us from knowing our own ignorance, preventing us from moving beyond them to the truth. As the palinode describes the *erga* and *pathe* of the soul, this problem only appears more urgent, for it shows that these dangers are intensified by the force with which images act upon the soul.

*Embracing Discursive Dangers: Socrates’ Supplement*

Given his description of these problems, one might expect Socrates to shun the use of images in order to return to the abstract manner of discourse by which he defined the soul. Indeed, Socrates’ criticism of conventional theology seems to demand that level of abstraction. However, without dispelling these problems, Socrates does not abandon images. Instead, Socrates abruptly brackets these difficulties, saying, “Let these matters, and our account thereof, be as God pleases” (246d), and he returns to an image-laden description of the passions and actions of the soul. Of course, despite Socrates’ hesitations, the decision to use images in his discourse had already been made. Prior to noting the danger of images, Socrates had already shifted away from the abstraction of his initial approach. He had abandoned the definitional argument that the soul is immortal and self-moving for a more concrete, image-based narrative in which he likens the soul to a charioteer with his team of horses (246a). Indeed, Socrates’ critique of the role that images play in discussions of the soul only briefly interrupts the development of this image.

Socrates marks the transition from his definitional argument to his image-based one by reflecting on his mode of discourse. “As to the soul’s immortality then we have said enough,” he says, “but as to its form (*ideas*\(^{73}\)) there is this that must be said. What manner of thing it is (*oion men esti*) would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it, but what it resembles (*ho de eoiken*), that a man might tell in briefer compass” (246a, translation modified). As Socrates reflects upon his approach, it is clear that the soul remains the object of his discourse, but he now approaches it in visual terms (*idea*, *ho... eoiken*). Following up on his self-imposed demand that he “see” (*idonta*) the soul, its passions and actions (245c), Socrates

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\(^{72}\) *Eidos*, “that which is seen,” is derived from the same verb—*eidon*, “to see”—as the participle that Socrates uses to define the task of his discourse and the failings of theology (*idonta/es*).

\(^{73}\) *Ideas* is part of the same family of words, derived from *eidon* (to see) as *idontes* and *eidos*. 
admits that he cannot satisfactorily say what the idea, the form or look of the soul is (esti); so he redefines his task as saying what it resembles (ho de eoiken, what it looks like) as opposed to what it is. In light of this, one should understand that Socrates cannot surpass his traditional, theological rivals by simply taking the time to sufficiently see or conceive of the soul before discussing it. He faces the same epistemological problem as others, the soul’s invisibility.

As he continues, Socrates underscores the shift from a definitional statement about what the soul is to an analogical mode of reasoning about the soul is like. It is worth recalling the terms that Socrates uses a moment earlier in his claim to have defined the soul as self-motion. He claims to have revealed that “self-motion” constitutes “the essence and definition of the soul” (psyches ousian te kai logon). The word translated as “essence” is ousia, a participle form of eimi (to be), so the definition seems to be rooted in the being of the soul. With this in mind, the contrast that Socrates draws between what he can and cannot say about the form of the soul more clearly marks a departure from the definitional argument. Regarding the soul’s form, Socrates insists, he can only say what it resembles (ho de eoiken), not what it is (oion men esti). Giving up his attempt to articulate its being, he now seeks to produce a likeness of it. As he continues, Socrates again marks the contrast between these ways of speaking, “Let this therefore be our manner of discourse (taute oun legomen). Let it be likened (eoiketo) to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer” (246a, my emphasis). Before turning to this much-discussed image of the soul, it is important to ask why Socrates abandons the abstract mode of discourse for an image-based one.

In particular, if Socrates is able to define what the soul is (self-motion), why is he unable to articulate its form or idea? What sets the ousia of the soul apart from its idea, such that Socrates can so quickly dispense with the former while deeming the latter definition beyond the powers of man? Why instead, when he comes to consider the form of the soul, does Socrates have to abandon the task of definition altogether in order to launch into a much more lengthy discourse that can only hope to produce some semblance of the soul? Finally, what should one make of this shift in tactic? Does Socrates’ recognition of the limits of human discourse suggest the inevitable failure or incompleteness of our knowledge of the soul?

Though he does not take up quite the same questions, Griswold provides some helpful suggestions. Describing the change in Socrates’ manner of discourse, he suggests that the abstract definition of the soul as self-motion “seems to be trying to perceive the soul’s nature without looking at its ‘experiences’ (or ‘sufferings,’ ‘passions,’ ‘conditions,’ ‘states’) and ‘doings’ (or ‘deeds,’ ‘actions,’ ‘activities’)” (80). The move toward abstraction at the start of the erotic discourse, then can be understood as isolating the soul’s nature from its passions and actions—its being from its becomings. The examination of the soul’s pathé and erga, Griswold suggests, “takes up… the mythic portion of (Socrates’ proof),” and “we must therefore rely (on this portion) for help in understanding the meaning of self-motion and soul” (81). Abstracting the soul from the world in which it is located, which means abstracting the soul from its passions and actions as well, Socrates is able define the soul as “self-motion.” However, while Socrates is satisfied with this definition, it is difficult to discern just what this means until he reintroduces the soul’s passions and actions into his discourse (and in the process, a whole world of images).

There seems to be a tension here between a desire to isolate the soul, and a need to understand it in context. This prompts Griswold to ask, “Is the soul something over and above its experiences and doings, a tertium quid? And if this is true,” he continues, “(is) explicating the meaning of ‘self-motion’ in terms of its pathé and erga… admitting that the essence of the soul must remain permanently beyond our grasp” (81)? If the answer to both questions is yes,
Griswold argues, Socrates’ project of self-knowledge is doomed, for the soul forever eludes our comprehension. The project of self-knowledge can be salvaged, Griswold suggests, if the soul is not something above and beyond its pathe and erga. If that is the case, then the soul can be known through the pathe and erga in which its self-motion is manifest. Saying that the soul is not something beyond its actions and passions does not mean that the soul can be reduced to any given empirical manifestation of its self-motion. Nevertheless, this would mean that one can come to know “it”—one can come to know one’s soul, one’s self—through its passions and actions. Socrates’ opening move toward abstraction then betrays a tension in his approach to the soul. The problem is that it seems to separate the task of defining the soul’s nature (psyches phuseos, its being) from the task of examining its passions and actions, when these tasks actually accomplish the same thing. The tension, however, is productive insofar as the abstraction prevents a sort of naïve positivism that would strip “the soul” of its transformative potential, freezing the individual in his or her present, empirical form.

I am sympathetic to Griswold’s position, but I have some reservations. First of all, I should point out that though he does not dwell on it, Griswold does well to indicate that the turn towards the soul’s passions and actions coincides with the reintroduction of concrete images into Socrates’ discourse. It makes sense that these things should coincide, because by definition, the soul’s passions and actions will relate the soul to something other than itself. To suffer something, to act upon something, is to exist in a world of relations. An investigation of such phenomena lends itself to the use of images in a way that the attempt to abstract and isolate the soul from all of its entanglements does not.

What Griswold overlooks is Socrates’ meditation on his manner of speaking. In particular, though he notices that Socrates’ speech becomes more concrete, Griswold does not provide a satisfying account of Socrates’ sudden embrace of semblances (eoika). In particular, he does not notice that Socrates redefines the object of his discourse so that, though he is still concerned about the soul, he now addresses its form (idea) rather than its being (ousia). Griswold insists that “physis,’ ‘ousia,’ and ‘idea’ all mean the same,” and describes the change in Socrates’ approach primarily as abandoning “narrative” (92). However, Griswold does not account for why Socrates should go from claiming that he has revealed the definition and being (ousia) of the soul to formulating a new approach entirely (245e). Ultimately, I believe that the aspects of this passage that Griswold does not account for can be marshaled to support his contention that the soul is not something over and above its actions and passions.

Indeed, if the soul is not something distinct from its passions and actions, this fact may help to explain why the turn from a definition of the soul’s “being” (ousia) to a description of its “form” (idea) proves so problematic. If the soul is visible only in its passions and actions, which it is neither distinct from nor reducible to, then the soul can never be “seen” (idonta) as such. A special sort of invisibility belongs to the soul. That is to say, the soul has no single idea—appearance, semblance, look—with which it could be properly identified. So, while the existence of the soul is not doubted and it can be defined formally as self-motion, that definition remains essentially empty until it is filled out by the soul’s varied appearances. The definition only becomes meaningful when the soul is seen in its relations, in its passions, in its actions. However, as Socrates warns in his critique of images, the soul should not be confused with any one of its appearances. To try to articulate the idea—the image, the form—of the soul would be to insist that it exists as something separable from the actions and passions in which it is manifest. Any attempt to articulate a definitive form for the soul would ignore Socrates’ characterization of it as “always becoming different in different forms” (246b, psyche… allot’ en
The myth is told in a vocabulary that stresses the manner in which the soul takes on and sloughs off different images or likenesses. At various points in Socrates’ account of psychic transformation, he describes the soul of the lover as making itself a “likeness” or a “copy” of its god, *eikasmene, mimoumenos* (248a, 252d). On the other hand, the beloved is described both as “godlike” initially (251a, *theoeides*, an image of a god) and as being made godlike or fashioned in the image of a god by the lover (253a-b). The myth that occupies most of the palinode not only tells the story of the soul’s transformation in terms of its migration between bodies (the lives of *zoa*), but it tells a second tale of transformation that takes place within the span of a single life. The erotic encounter is described as affecting a variety of changes within the form of the soul—causing hardened portions of the soul to melt, causing the soul to grow wings, and so on. If it is not evident when Socrates initially warns us of the confusion that images introduce into discussions of the soul, by the end of his palinode it should be clear that images threaten to warp our understanding of the soul by unduly anchoring it to a single, inessential appearance.

Despite the epistemological difficulties that attend the use of images in psychological discourses, Socrates develops a consistent set of images that he likens the soul to. Most prominent among these is the image of the soul as a chariot. Even as Socrates notes the impossibility of articulating a definitive form of the soul, the analogical approach that he adopts overtly embraces images for indicating what the soul is like. In fact, Socrates not only embraces images, but he uses the image of the gods in the palinode’s great myth as a model of what a soul is and ought to be. So, though he does not resolve the epistemological difficulties that he attributes to discussions of the soul, Socrates nonetheless treats the “likenesses” of the soul that his myth employs in a normative fashion. As we will see, the myth provides an image that is used to interpret and correct the desire of the philosophical lover and his beloved, the myth’s gods providing the erotic pair with an image to emulate.

This marks an important reversal, for the likeness that is deployed as a means of helping us understand the soul becomes a model for philosophical discipline to reproduce in the soul of the individual. Socrates’ warning that the task of definitively describing the form of the human soul lies beyond human powers may caution us against reifying the images he employs, but the warning itself does not put Socrates’ images on any more solid ground. More importantly, despite the warning, he seems to seek to do just that—to reify the image by making it manifest in the soul of his beloved. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this point, for it cuts to the heart of the *Phaedrus’* erotic and rhetorical projects. As we have seen, Socrates makes understanding the soul the fundamental task of both arts, so to the extent that Socrates can offer only “likenesses” (*eoika*) of the soul, the foundation of both of his “arts” appears shaky.

We are left with the question, how is it that Socrates can speak in likenesses about that which either lacks a proper form (*idea*) or whose form remains beyond human understanding? What would it mean to produce images that look like something that has no image to begin with? What anchors these likenesses when the image of that which they are likenesses of either does not exist or remains unknown? The problem is that one could not hope to evaluate the truth of such likenesses without first having access to a standard. However, the reason for speaking in likenesses is that *that* standard (the *idea* of the soul) can only be indirectly gestured towards and established through such likenesses. After raising these questions, Socrates appears to wave them off (“let these matters… be as God pleases”). Of course, Socrates does not really dismiss these concerns as easily as he suggests. Instead, he displaces the problem, so that rather than...
treating it as epistemological problem he treats it as a pragmatic one; he does not attempt to resolve this problem in terms of truth but in terms of effect.

I am getting a bit ahead of myself here, but I want to suggest that the palinode offers grounds aside from truth upon which to judge such likenesses. Rather than asking about the truth of images or likenesses of the soul, the palinode suggests that images be evaluated pragmatically, according to their effect upon the soul. Rather than asking the impossible questions of whether a likeness of the soul corresponds to its actual form one should ask about the consequences of adopting one image rather than another. The question is this: How does the image that one uses to think of the soul shape its actions and passions going forward? If the soul is not something over and above its *pathe* and *erga*, then the question amounts to asking how the image transforms the *pathe* and *erga* of the soul. As we will see then, the same anxiety over the transformative potential of discourse gets played out again, though generally in a more positive tone, in the palinode’s account of the effect of images upon the soul.

**PURIFYING/NOURISHING THE SOUL: Discourse, Image & Desire in the Palinode**

*Two Likenesses: Receptacle & Chariot.* At the same time that we ask about the transformative potential of images, we must return to the question of the soul’s purification. On the one hand, the question remains as to how a discourse that originates from elsewhere can purify the soul that it has invaded. The genealogy of Stesichorus, whose palinode is such a discourse—foreign and purifying—gives us some indication that the solution has to do with the relation between speech and desire, but more needs to be said about this. Indeed, if the preceding analysis is correct and Socrates does not treat the soul as a *tertium quid*, we have to ask, what would it mean to purify this thing which is not a thing? The remainder of this chapter and the next chapter will answer these questions by examining two likenesses of the soul employed by the palinode, the chariot and the receptacle. At the same time as the issue of purification is clarified, these images will help elaborate the relation between *logos* and *eros*, rhetoric and erotics. Before diving into either image, however, it is first necessary to say a few words about the role each plays within its context.

The chariot image is introduced just after Socrates signals his change in discursive strategy (where he abandons abstract definition in favor of “likenesses”) and just before his warning about the danger of images in psychological discussions (246a, 246c-d). At this point, Socrates says, “Let (the soul) be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer” (246a-b). He then goes on to distinguish between divine and human souls, saying that whereas both horses in the divine team are “good, and of good stock,” the plight of the human chariot is complicated by the presence of a horse of the opposite character (246b). It is understandable that this image of the soul has garnered a lot of attention from readers of Plato; for not only does rest of the palinode consistently refer back to this image but it is fit into a dramatic story. The chariot/soul is placed within a myth that is rife with struggle. It has “internal” struggles (amongst the charioteer and his steeds) and it has “external” struggles, against the mythological *topos* in which it is situated as it climbs to the top of the heavens and falls injured, to earth, where its struggles continues.

While there has been no want of attention to this image, scholars have almost universally missed the less dazzling likeness that the palinode evokes. Again, this is understandable; the receptacle image is less spectacular than the chariot image. It does not lend itself to the same kind of drama as a chariot. Indeed, Socrates never even explicitly says, as he does about the chariot (246a-b), “Let us liken (*eoiketo*) the soul to a receptacle”; nor does he use the term
“receptacle” (angeios) as he does when, introducing his first speech, he describes himself as a receptacle that is filled by the words of others (235c-d). Socrates’ evocation of this image is diffused throughout the palinode’s description of erotic passion. Nevertheless, the palinode’s treatment of erotic passion quietly figures the soul as a receptacle when it describes influxes of images, beauty and desire filling and overflowing the soul; and Socrates’ previous description of himself as a receptacle for alien logoi allows us to discern this image where it is not directly cited.

By tracing the contours of this image, I hope to show how it helps Socrates think through the soul’s susceptibility to being transformed by discourse (logos), by images (idea, eidos, beauty) and by desire (eros). Examining both images together, I believe, will not only allow me to clarify the mechanics of discourse, images, and desire, showing how they transform the soul, it will also allow me to clarify the question of what constitutes a “purifying” discourse. And answering the latter question will help characterize the ethopoetic aims of the discourse by which Plato distinguishes his protagonist (the dialectic).

In order to understand what each image contributes to Plato’s problematization of the soul’s relation to desire and discourse and to understand what “purification” entails, I will explore these likenesses of the soul in more depth. However, to orient that discussion, I want to make an observation about the different roles that each image plays in the palinode. The chariot image is used in a myth that establishes a broader, more encompassing time frame, which stretches beyond the life of the individual (zoon). It tells the story of the soul before birth and after death. It tells the story of the soul’s original and originary desire, and by doing so, it makes the earthly plight of the soul—its erotic life and discursive life, in particular—intelligible against a cosmic horizon. Contained within this story, indeed, at its heart, is the more familiar experience of the erotic encounter. Whereas the myth and its image of the soul as a chariot frame Socrates’ account of eroticism as a whole, the chariot image tends to recede when Socrates turns to the experience of the lover and his beloved. When occupied with this more discrete event the outlines of the receptacle image become discernible. Each image situates the soul in a process of erotic transformation, but the terms they use and the relationships they highlight as they figure that process vary. So, it is necessary to examine both images, and to ask how they figure the soul and the processes of erotic transformation and purification.

**Image One: The Receptacle**

The palinode’s suggestion that the soul is akin to a receptacle remains implicit, but the image nevertheless plays an important role in Socrates’ attempt to account for the complexities of the erotic situation. Socrates describes the soul’s experience (pathe) of images and desire in a manner that clearly recalls his description of himself as a receptacle that has been filled by alien voices. Because this remains implicit, not many have commented on the role of this image within the palinode. In fact, to my knowledge, only one person has observed the soul’s likeness to a receptacle in this context, but the observation is made in passing. After relating a number of passages that show the soul “repeatedly penetrated by a variety of liquid influxes,” Nightingale writes, “these passages indicate, the soul is a receptacle of various liquid streams that ‘flow into’ and ‘fill’ it” (1995 160). Nightingale’s comment is apt, as is her suggestion that the condition of the soul is essentially “permeable” (1995 160); but she does not elaborate on what it means to say that the soul is a receptacle aside from saying that this makes it “analogous to… the passive partner in sexual intercourse” (1995 160).  

74 I will return to this connection in Chapter Five.
remarks to noting the erotic analogue. In particular, though she says that the palinode treats the soul as a “receptacle” for streams of beauty and nourishment, she does not connect this figuration of the soul to Socrates’ overt characterization of himself as a receptacle for alien discourse before his first speech (235c-d). In short, Nightingale looks at this figure in too limited of a context, isolating the erotic use of the receptacle analogy from its discursive use. The result is that she neglects an opportunity to clarify the relationship between the dialogue’s two main concerns, rhetoric and erotics.

If Nightingale’s description of the palinode is right, as I believe it is, then Socrates uses the same image to describe the soul’s relation to desire and to images that he uses to describe its relation to logoi. Thus, he raises the same set of concerns about desire and images as he does about discourse. It is not necessary to review all the details of this anxiety as it was previously treated. I will, of course, point out some echoes of those anxieties, but here it is more important to see how the present evocation of the image shapes the problem of purification.

Like Socrates’ commentary on the first two speeches, the palinode’s description of the soul’s experience of desire and beauty is ambivalent. This ambivalence arises out of essentially the same concerns as Socrates’ ambivalence regarding the discourse of others. On the one hand, desire and beauty (images), like the word of another, like the discourse of Stesichorus, are described as capable of nourishing the soul and of restoring it to an earlier, purified state. This positive potential of speech, of course, is barely even hinted at prior to the call for a purifying discourse. On the other hand, also like foreign logoi, this nourishing potential depends upon images and desire coming into a disconcertingly intimate contact with the soul; and there is no guarantee that this contact will bolster rather than undermine the soul’s health and integrity. Of course, the palinode is working to recuperate the value of eros, so on the whole, its tone is more positive than the anxieties Socrates expresses about alien discourse.

That said, this aim of the palinode does not prevent Socrates from worrying about the integrity of the soul. As with the anxieties that Socrates expresses about foreign logoi, the anxieties that attend the experience of eros gather about the surface of the soul. It is an issue of boundaries. As Nightingale has suggested, the palinode portrays the soul as exceedingly permeable. It emphasizes the passivity of a soul whose boundaries are penetrated and undermined by substances foreign to it. When the palinode describes the lover’s vision of his beloved, latter’s beauty is described as traversing the soul of the lover. When the lover catches sight of his beloved, “(a) stream of beauty enter(s) in through his eyes” and infuses his soul with “warmth” (251b). The beloved’s beauty is described as “nourishment” that “pour(s)” into the soul of the lover (251b). Again, whenever the soul “gazes upon the boy’s beauty,” Socrates insists, “she (the soul) admits a flood of particles streaming therefrom—that is why we speak of a ‘flood of passion’—whereby she is warmed and fostered: then she has respite from her anguish, and is filled with joy” (251c-d, my emphasis). As descriptions such as these proliferate, what we see is that the palinode consistently likens images, beauty and desire to liquids that break in upon the soul of lover.

75 Like the Protagoras, where Socrates describes of the soul as a receptacle that is nourished or harmed by the teachings it receives (313a-314b), Socrates’ descriptions of logoi as food at the start of the Phaedrus suggests some nourishing potential, but they are ambivalent. The reference to Lysias treating Phaedrus to a “feast of eloquence” seems derisive, especially in retrospect, after Socrates must purify himself of it (227b); and Socrates’ references to logoi as food that might be used to drive him forward as one drives an animal links logos to compulsion (227e, 229d).
In addition to echoing Socrates’ descriptions of the circulation of discourse, the palinode’s depiction of the liquid flow of images and desire maps the receptacle-image onto the body. The soul remains the subject of desire. It is always the soul that is described as admitting a flood of desire, as being filled and nourished, and so on. However, as when he described the circulation of discourse, tracing its path through the ears into the chest and out of the mouth, Socrates consistently traces the path of desire through the body. Socrates repeatedly notes the eyes as the point of entry for beauty and desire (251b, 255d), and describes the varied effects of desire spreading throughout the soul in very bodily terms: The soul “throbs like a fevered pulse” (251d); it is suffused with “the sensation of warmth,” “a tickling or pricking of desire” (254a); it is “drench(ed)... in sweat” (254c); and “swell(s) with desire” (256a).

It might seem strange that Socrates would use such bodily imagery to describe the soul’s experience, particularly, after his warning about the tendency to confuse the soul with the body. However, the reasons for superimposing the receptacle image onto the body are understandable. For one thing, the description of the soul as a receptacle is, in itself, rather vague. What form exactly would angeios suggest? About the only thing that the image would require one to imagine is an object with some kind of opening onto an inner space that would render it vulnerable to contamination by something foreign to itself. As vague as this image is, it does capture something important about the erotic experience. In the erotic encounter, the soul/receptacle is passive and is subjected to the action of something foreign to itself, something that penetrates it, moves it and threatens its integrity.

This passivity makes the erotic encounter quite threatening. Anne Carson’s comment on the ambivalence that the lyric poets express about eros helps to clarify the issue. Linking the lyric poets’ ambivalence about eros to the issue of psychic boundaries, Carson argues, “To control the boundaries is to possess oneself. For individuals to whom self-possession has become important, the influx of a sudden, strong emotion from without cannot be an unalarming event” (Carson 44-45). The issue of self-possession, of course, is precisely the issue that the first two speeches turn against Eros. The strong, sudden influxes of beauty and emotion that characterize desire threaten the subject’s ability to resist his environment. These speeches not only thematize this danger, their performance dramatizes it. Phaedrus’ ecstasy, as he delivered Lysias’ speech and the sudden invasion of Socrates by foreign logoi illustrate the erotic-discursive struggle over boundaries of the subject.

This constitutes a threat to the subject’s identity. In terms of Socrates’ definition of the soul, one might say that such influxes threaten to disrupt the “self-motion” that is the soul (245e); and so, they threaten the very being of the soul. The beauty of the beloved communicates a force that sets the soul of the lover into motion, but the motion does not seem to be the lover’s. Rather, he is set in motion, moved by what is foreign.

At the same time that we are invited to think about this experience in terms of motion, the analogy that likens the soul to a receptacle invites us to think purification and self-possession in terms of integrity—as compromised boundaries, compromised bodies. As when Socrates uses the term “receptacle” to characterize himself as the space traversed by the discourses of others, when this image is evoked in the description of erotic experience, the soul appears as something exceedingly passive. Floods of beauty break in upon the soul, overwhelming it, “seizing” it (253a, enthousiaontes; 252c, ho leptheis, he who is seized, 251b, thermotes aethes lambanei, a strange fever seizes him). By superimposing the receptacle-image onto the body, Socrates is able to make it more concrete and specific to the experience he describes, be it erotic or discursive. (Indeed, one can easily imagine other orifices, which, depending upon the object
would be integrated into the workings of desire). This is a key quality of this composite image of the soul as a body/receptacle; it makes the soul solid while also marking that stability or identity as threatened. The threat to the soul’s self-possession is given physical form. By mapping the receptacle-analogy onto the body, Socrates enlists the body’s vulnerability to underscore how threatening this experience can be.

*Figuring the Threat of the Foreign: Self-Control & the Perforated Jar*

The clearest expression of this threat, which remains purely within the terms of the receptacle analogy while embracing both the erotic and discursive uses, does not appear in the *Phaedrus*, but in the *Gorgias*. Though I will not linger on this image for too long, it is worth seeing how the analogy is used there to raise the concern with purity.

It is a mark of the consistency of Plato’s concern over the soul’s disconcertingly intimate relation to the desire and discourse that in the *Gorgias* Socrates uses the same receptacle analogy. As used by the *Gorgias*, the analogy expresses the same ambivalence regarding the soul’s relation to desire and to discourse, and it indicates the same reasons for anxiety. In the *Gorgias* the analogy is invoked in a similar context. Socrates does not speak of madness *per se*, but he raises the closely related question of self-rule (491d, *heautou archonta*). Interrogating Callicles about his conception of natural justice and the man who embodies it, Socrates asks whether he is “his own master” or whether he “only govern(s) others” (491d). Callicles asks what governing oneself entails, and Socrates explains that it involves “being temperate and in control of oneself, mastering one’s own pleasures and appetites” (491d). With his concern over one’s relationship to one’s pleasures and appetites (*hedonon kai epithumon*), Socrates not only raises the issue of self-rule, but he specifies the terms of the problem. As in the *Phaedrus* what is suggested here is that intense desires and pleasures threaten to overwhelm the subject.76

Callicles wholeheartedly rejects Socrates’ intimations that one should master one’s desires and pleasures in the pursuit of temperance. He restates his position, “Anyone who is to live aright… should suffer his appetites to grow to the greatest extent and not check them, and through courage and intelligence should be competent to minister to them at their greatest” (491e-492a). Socrates then points out an important consequence of Callicles’ position. “Then those who are in need of nothing are not rightly called happy” (492e), Socrates says, implying that it is counterintuitive that satisfaction should not constitute happiness. However, Callicles does not back down. Instead, he draws out the consequence of Socrates’ rebuttal. If the absence of desire constitutes happiness, then “stones and corpses would be supremely happy” (492e). Socrates does not respond directly to Callicles, but instead offers an image of the soul’s proper relation to desire. The image Socrates offers, of course, is the image of the soul as a receptacle.

Though the image remains the same as elsewhere, the terms that articulate vary slightly. Rather than using the word “receptacle” (*angeios*), Socrates imagines the soul as a jar (*pithos*):

I once heard one of our wise men say that we are now dead and that our body (*soma*) is a tomb (*sema*), and that that part of the soul in which dwell the desires is of a nature to be swayed (*anapeithesthai*, persuaded) and to shift to and fro. And so some clever fellow, a Sicilian perhaps or Italian, writing in allegory, by slight perversion of language named this part of the soul a jar (*pithon*), because it can be

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76 Foucault points out that the problem of self-rule was widely diffused in Greek culture, and that it was articulated and focused in particular on one’s relationship to pleasure (*hedone*) (Foucault 1985). While Foucault’s reading of Plato is very compelling, I believe that he strategically downplays the role of desire in order to distance his project of “the care of the self” from his previous critique of the modern constitution of “the subject of desire”. *History of Sexuality, v. 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978.
swayed and easily persuaded (pithanon), and that part of the soul in foolish people where desires reside — the uncontrolled and nonretentive part (ou steganon, not watertight) — he likened to a leaky jar (tetremenos... pithos), because it can never be filled. (493a-b)

This iteration of the receptacle analogy is a helpful addition to the image as used in the Phaedrus. Particularly important is the contrast that Socrates draws between the leaky jar and the sound one, between the soul that is non-retentive, easily swayed/persuaded and uncontrolled and the disciplined soul. Juxtaposing these two images of the soul next to one another, Socrates figures two different ways of life, Callicles’ and his own. The two images of the soul not only show that the soul can be transformed—developing or closing perforations, as the case may be—but they also show that such transformations change how the soul weather powerful influxes of speech and desire. Is the soul easily moved, persuaded, compelled by what is foreign to it or is it able to resist such transmissions? Is the soul porous and vulnerable to what is outside of itself or is it able to withstand the draw of desirable objects, because it contains within itself the resources it needs?

With his description of the soul as a leaky or sound jar, Socrates clearly draws on the same image that he uses in the Phaedrus. The soul is again treated as a receptacle that is open to and moved by the liquid influxes of desire and discourse. Socrates does not speak of beauty per se, but of substances that promise various pleasures (wine, honey, milk), but the image raises the same set of concerns. As in the Phaedrus, sudden influxes of speech and desire threaten to disrupt the self-rule of the subject (heauton archonta). The difference is that Socrates points to two different psychic conditions in order to suggest that some souls are better able to resist such threats. The contrast that the various iterations of this image in the Gorgias draw between sound and the leaky jars—between disciplined and undisciplined souls—represent a transformation of the soul in terms of the physical structure of the receptacle. Socrates stresses the wholeness and integrity of the soul as the condition of self-rule and happiness. It is the integrity of the receptacle/soul that enables it to resist impulses from without.

Socrates draws this out in a second iteration of the image. After his first image fails to change Callicles’ opinion about what one’s proper relation to desire is, Socrates introduces a more familiar, human element into the image. He addresses Callicles again:

Come then, let me offer you another image from the same school as the last. Consider whether you would say this of each type of life, the temperate and the undisciplined. Imagine that each of the two men has several jars, one with wine, another with honey, another with milk, and many others with a variety of liquids, but... the sources of these liquids are scanty and hard to come by.... Imagine then that the one after filling his vessels does not trouble himself to draw in further supplies but... is free from worry; in the case of the other man (his circumstances are the same)...., but his vessels are perforated and unsound and he is ever compelled (anangkazoito) to spend day and night... replenishing them, if he is not to suffer the greatest agony. (493d-494a)

77 “Self-rule” in the Gorgias seems to act as a rough equivalent of the Phaedrus’ “self-motion.” Both texts not only use the same image to articulate the same anxieties; but the problem of self-rule, which is what prompts Socrates to introduce this image in the Gorgias, is quickly translated by that image into motion. The soul is “easily swayed,” “shift(ing) to and fro,” and so on.

78 The Greek switches from pithos to angeia (the plural of angeios) here.
The ability of the soul to maintain control of itself depends upon it being whole; it depends on the soul’s boundaries being free of perforations that would open it and subject it to the outside world. If not completely self-sufficient—after all, a receptacle must open in some way—this image portrays the disciplined man, who rests content with his supplies, as more withdrawn from the world and buffered from its forces. The intemperate soul, by contrast, is kept in constant contact world, because his untamed desire keeps driving him out into the world in order to draw more of what he desires into himself. Day and night, the undisciplined man is “ever compelled” (from anangke) to replenish the liquids that flow through his leaky jars.

What this image ultimately suggests is that this contact with the external world is the site of compulsion. This relation to the external world, symbolized by the porous receptacle, is what subjects the soul by what is foreign to it. This is the same danger that Socrates worries about when he describes the erotic encounter in the Phaedrus; and it is the same danger that worries him when he is invaded by the voices of others during ‘his’ first speech.

**Dangerous Relations**

The receptacle image stresses the danger of any relation that the soul enters into, because what the soul is and what it will become always hangs in the balance. Indeed, if the soul is not something above and beyond its passions (pathe) and actions (erga), we have to understand it as being constituted in those relations. If the soul is not a third term that exists prior to all of its relationships, it comes into being through them. This seems to be why the receptacle image is used to raise the issue of purity and purification. It is not that Socrates wants to eliminate everything that does not originate from his soul: the palinode with which Socrates purifies himself is after all attributed to Stesichorus; and the image of the soul as a jar (pithos) is twice attributed to others. Rather, Socrates uses the receptacle image to suggest to his interlocutors that the reception of the word or image of the other is a dangerous and transformative event.

While such encounters threaten the disintegration of the soul by subjecting it to alien forces, Socrates suggests that they can also transform the soul for the better. Socrates gestures toward the positive potential of alien logoi in this context when he asks Callicles about the effect that the pithos analogy has had on him. After each use of the receptacle analogy in the Gorgias, Socrates asks Callicles whether he is persuaded: “But do I persuade you to change and admit that orderly folk are happier than the undisciplined… will you not withdraw an inch?” (493c-d); “Do I or do I not persuade you with this image that the disciplined life is better than the intemperate?” (494a). George Kimball Plochmann and Franklin E. Robinson, who do not seem to know what to make of the pithos analogy, ask why Socrates would put such hope in its persuasiveness. “Callicles is energetic, resistant, (and) combative,” they write, “Why does (Socrates) even ask whether Callicles is persuaded by a couple of simple figures of speech, taken from subjects as commonplace as jars?”

Plochmann and Robinson are right to ask this. Socrates’ manner of posing the question is conspicuous. However, their answer leaves something to be desired. Plochmann and Robinson suggest that the images present “a series of arguments appealing not to the intellect but rather to the eye, which is the best way to delineate raw desire and bald satisfaction in a brief discourse” (148). Their explanation is grounded in Callicles’ commitment to “raw desire,” but Plochmann and Robinson miss an important point.

They ignore the fact that Socrates’ question, do I persuade you (peitho ti se), the exact formulation of which, he repeats twice, utilizes the same language as the pithos/pithanon pun.

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80 See the discussion of Callicles’ conception of “natural justice” in Chapter One.
The pun is all about persuasion. It not only identifies the soul with its analogue, ho pithos (the jar), but it calls the soul ho pithos because of its capacity to be persuaded, pithanon. The pun effectively identifies the soul with persuasion. That is, the pun identifies the soul with the effect of another’s logos. More broadly, still, one could say that the pun identifies the soul with this capacity to be compelled by what is outside of oneself, for while the discursive experience of persuasion is the paradigm for understanding this experience, Socrates’ analogy is clearly more inclusive. It is not just another’s discourse, but also various objects of desire that are described as moving, persuading and compelling the undisciplined soul; so when Socrates asks whether the image persuades Callicles to change or whether he is moved, he implicates his own speech in the transformative, erotic-discursive practice, whose conditions the pithos analogy describes.

Plochmann and Robinson are left with a weak explanation of Socrates’ question, because they do not recognize Socrates’ programmatic concern with the effect of another’s logos. For this same reason, they are also at a loss as to why Socrates twice attributes the pithos analogy to someone else. Socrates not only attributes the first iteration of the image to “some clever fellow, a Sicilian perhaps or Italian” (493a), but he says that the second image is “from the same school as the last” (493d). These also immediately follow citations of Euripides and “one of our wise men” (493a). Plochmann and Robinson do well to ask, “Why refer to the Sicilians or Italians at all?” (146). However, their explanation that “perhaps Plato wished to give credit to either Philolaus or Archytas, both Italians” or that it is an appeal to Polus and Gorgias, who are from Italy, do little to enrich our understanding of the text (146). On the other hand, if we understand the pithos analogy as articulating the anxieties and the promise that attach to alien discourses, then it is quite fitting that Socrates should trace the origin of this image back to another speaker. Doing so further implicates Socrates’ discourse and the image itself in the very process of transmission and psychic transformation that it figures. Indeed, given the concern with persuasion, it is all the more fitting that it should be traced back to Sicily, because it is the home of Corax, the legendary father of rhetoric.

Indeed, if the image of the “unsound vessel” represents the condition of Callicles’ soul, then in the very condition of unsoundness, it also locates Socrates’ hope of persuading him. After all, it is the perforations of the soul that open it to what is outside of itself, making it easier to sway and persuade. Paradoxically, however, it seems that this condition of porousness, which potentially opens Callicles up to discipline, is what such discipline seeks to overcome. The representation of disciplined and undisciplined souls with sound and leaky jars suggests that the effect Socratic discipline would be to seal the soul’s extra openings in order to allow it some respite from the constant incursions of erotic and discursive stimuli. “After filling his vessels,” Socrates says, “(the disciplined man) does not trouble himself to draw in further supplies but… is free from worry.” Though withdrawn, the disciplined man does not shun everything that does not originate from himself. After all, just as in the Phaedrus, where Socrates’ purifying discourse originates from elsewhere, the Gorgias’ pithos-image, which Socrates hopes will change Callicles, originates from elsewhere.

This helps to clarify the effect of the purifying discourse. “Purification,” for Socrates, is not an issue of escaping all foreign influence. In light of the opening drama of the Phaedrus which, despite Socrates and Phaedrus’ apparent isolation, bears witness to the invasion and contamination of Socrates by alien discourses such a hope seems improbable. Indeed, when Socrates decides to deliver a purifying discourse, he gives up on flight as a strategy. Moreover, in light of the various depictions of beauty and logoi as nourishing, such hopes seem undesirable; for escape from such influence, if possible, would deprive the soul of the positively valued
experience of beauty and *logoi* that the *Phaedrus’* palinode describes. So, a “purifying *logos,*” which is itself in some respect “foreign,” does not work by excluding all that is foreign from the soul. Rather, it strives to take control of the boundaries of the soul, regulating the flows of speech, beauty and desire that move through it.

The purifying *logos* does so by situating the soul in a particular set of relations, with respect to itself, with respect to alien *logoi,* and with respect to its objects of desire. By following the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias’* uses of the receptacle analogy, I have been able to describe the effect that Socrates’ purifying discourse seeks to produce. Broadly put, it looks to regularize the soul. The purifying discourse, like Socratic discipline in the *Gorgias,* would seem to buffer the soul against the powerful forces that act upon it from the outside. In terms of the receptacle analogy, the purifying discourse shores up its walls, so that it is not overwhelmed by powerful influxes of words, pleasures or desires that circulate around (and sometimes through) it.

In order to understand exactly how the purifying discourse does this, it is necessary to take a look at the palinode’s myth. If I am correct to suggest that the *Phaedrus* does not represent the soul as a thing that is distinct from its *pathe* and *erga,* then we have to understand the soul’s identity as being inextricably bound up with the relationships in which it is situated; so, to resituate the soul is to change it. This means that the myth, which not only gives us an image of the soul as a chariot, but which also situates that chariot within cosmic and terrestrial horizons, can be read as answering the question of what the “pure” soul looks like and what sort of relationships it inhabits. By turning to this image, then, we can not only gain a more specific understanding of what a “pure” soul, for Socrates, would look like, we can also answer the question raised by chapter one, regarding what kind of subject or *ethos* Socrates seeks to produce.
Chapter Four: THE MYTHIC TOPOS: Situating the Soul in a World of Relations

Self-Motion & Motivation: The Importance of the Soul’s Mythic Environs

The image of the soul as a chariot figures the Platonic/Socratic anxiety about purity in two interrelated ways: On the one hand, the chariot analogy returns us to Socrates’ definition of the soul as self-motion. The story of the procession and of the charioteer’s and his steeds’ struggles as they strive after the forms articulates this anxiety about purity in terms of motion. The soul’s activity and position in the mythic procession as it strives after its god and the forms provides a standard of self-motion and psychic health that fills out the details of Socrates’ definition. The myth outfits the soul with a world, thus moving beyond the purely formal and potentially solipsistic definition of the soul as self-motion. In addition to providing an image of a pure self-motion (one freed of external influence), the details of the procession explain the lover’s desire for his beloved while representing the erotic encounter as a way of returning the soul to an earlier, purer state. Along the way, the myth also describes how logos works in relation to memory in order to account for how logos can purify the soul.

On the other hand, the soul’s approximation of or deviation from this standard of self-motion is represented in terms of the integrity of soul’s form. Of course, chapter three has raised doubts as to whether the soul even has a form, properly speaking, so it needs to be kept in mind that the trope of integrity works analogically. The integrity of the soul is represented in terms of the wholeness of the chariot, particularly of its wings; and this trope is bolstered by familiar references to psychic nourishment. The soul’s changing situation, namely, whether or not it can secure its proper nourishment—a vision of the forms—is described as subjecting it to a series of transformations. Thus, in the myth and in the references that the analysis of the erotic encounter makes to the myth, Socrates details the growth of the soul’s wings along with the injuries, atrophies and deprivations that they suffer. The loss of this nourishing vision causes the soul to lose its wings, but to the extent that it can again experience its eidetic past, in logos and eros, it can regain them. The soul’s subsequent transformations provide images of its health and integrity. Additionally, the discussion of metempsychosis also registers changes in the health and integrity of the soul in terms of the bodies, human and animal, that it enters into.

The Procession: Positing the Original Motion & Desire of the Soul

Likening the soul to a charioteer with his steeds, Socrates extends his account of the experience of eros by situating the soul, before birth, in a heavenly procession. Human souls, along with those of lesser divinities and daemons are said to follow the Olympians across the heavens in pursuit of a nourishing vision of the forms. “Behold,” Socrates says, “there in the heaven Zeus, mighty leader drives his winged team…. ordering all things and caring therefor, and the host follows after him, marshaled in eleven companies” (246e-247a). Human souls fall in behind the gods, each following in the train of the god whose character it shares. The human soul is distinguished from the divine in terms of its ability to successfully approach the forms. The presence of the dark horse in the human chariot’s team complicates its efforts to ascend to the top of the heavens. The result is that while the gods make their way across the heavens easily, beholding “many spectacles of bliss” along the way (247a), human souls struggle with their unruly steeds and with each other, eventually devolving into a chaotic fracas behind their gods. This leaves the vast majority of them injured, causing them to fall to the earth where they land in a human body and begin their human lives (248a-b).

As important as this difference is, one should not overlook the key similarity that human and divine souls share: The souls of gods, like those of human, need nourishment. In fact, it is the desire for nourishment that occasions the heavenly procession and sets all souls into motion.
to begin with. When it comes time “to feast and banquet” (247b), Socrates explains, the gods
drive their chariots up the steep ascent to the top of the heavens with the rest of the souls
following behind. Once there, the gods “look upon the regions without the heavens” (247c,
theorouste ta ekso tou ouranou). They are said to “contemplate” and “feast upon” their vision of
the forms (247e, theasamene kai hestiatheisa). While the gods are able to rest at the top of the
heavens, taking in the forms until they are full, the human soul’s access to the nourishment of the
forms is more tenuous. “Being confounded by her steeds… (the human soul) has much ado to
discern the things that are… and by reason of her unruly steeds sees in part, but in part sees not”
(248a). The difference between human and divine souls lies in this difference in ability rather
than a difference in constitution. The presence of the dark horse in the human chariot’s team
should be taken as representing this difference of ability as opposed to a fundamental difference
in “type” or “nature” of soul. This interpretation is supported by the palinode’s account of
metempsychosis, which suggests not only that the “human” soul can become animal (249b), but
also that by attaining full enough vision of the forms, the soul can avoid taking on a human form
altogether (248c). The upshot is that the different types of soul should be thought of as
constituting a continuum rather than wholly distinct, unbridgeable “types”; and that when
Socrates describes philosophical eroticism as making the pair of lovers more divine, this should
be read quite literally. Indeed, the suggestion that the character of the soul is determined by the
vision of the forms is reinforced by a pun that Socrates appears to be making. Coming back to
the identification of the soul/receptacle with what it receives, the gods (theoi), who are most able
to contemplate (theorouste, theasamene) and feast upon “the many spectacles of bliss” (makaria
theai), appear to assimilate the qualities of what they see/eat. To the extent that the human soul
can do so, it too becomes divine.

At this point, Socrates provides one of the fullest accounts of the forms in the whole
Platonic corpus. I will have more to say about the forms, but there are two closely related points
that are of particular interest here. First, I want to underscore how important the soul’s
relationship to the forms is. Socrates treats this relationship, I argue, as constitutive of the soul.
It is the soul’s relation to the forms that generates its characteristic—indeed, definitive—self-
motion. According to Socrates, it is this relationship that makes the soul what it is. Hence, and
this is the second point, it is important to note the pronounced emphasis that Socrates places on
the nourishing quality of this vision. Describing the nourishment that is offered by the forms,
Socrates is represents this constitutive, psychic relationship as a transformative physical process,
registering its effects in terms of the growth of the soul’s wings and in terms of the bodies the
soul comes to inhabit.

Desire & Self-Motion: The Procession’s Nourishing End

The soul’s motion arises out its desire for the forms. Regardless of whether it is divine or
human, Socrates stresses, it is the soul’s desire for the nourishment of the forms that moves it:
Now even as the mind of a god is nourished (trephomene) by reason and
knowledge (episteme akerato, undefiled knowledge), so also is it with every soul
that has a care to receive her proper food (mele to prosekon deksathai), wherefore
when and last she has beheld being she is well content, and contemplating truth
she is nourished and prospers (trephetai kai eupathei). (247d, my emphasis)
Socrates quite clearly underscores that the gods and human souls share in the same plight here.
In this respect, it is necessary to qualify Jean-Pierre Vernant’s insistence in “One… Two…
Three: Eros,” that “That which is perfect and complete has no use for Eros. Divinity has no
knowledge of love” (469). Vernant draws on Diotima’s speech in the Symposium to make this
point and it is appropriate there, for she specifically contrasts Eros’ lack with the gods’ plenitude (Symp 202c). The problem is that Vernant’s account of Platonic eros runs the Symposium and the Phaedrus together too easily, and though their accounts of eros are largely compatible, they are not identical. In the Phaedrus, the gods are not “perfect and complete.” One might say that in the Phaedrus the gods are more perfect and more complete than mortals, because they are better able to pursue the forms and fill themselves on that vision; so, they more fully assimilate the qualities of the forms. Nevertheless, like human souls, divine souls are moved by a desire for nourishment.

This is essential to Socrates’ definition of the soul as self-motion. This desire not only sets the soul into motion, but the soul is nothing other than motion (245e-246a, me allo ti einai to auto heauto kinoun e psychen). Desire for the forms, then, must be understood as that which makes the soul what it is. This characterization is both descriptive and normative; and it is important enough that Socrates makes the point more than once. The movement of the human procession, Socrates says, shadows the gods, but it seems more boisterous and full of motion than the divine one. “Of other souls,” Socrates says, that which best follows a god and becomes most like thereunto (eikasmene) raises her charioteer’s head into the outer region and is carried round with the gods… but being confounded by her steeds she has much ado to discern the things that are (ta onta); another now rises, and now sinks, and by reason of her unruly steeds sees in part, but in part sees not. As for the rest, though all are eager to reach the heights and follow, they are not able (adunatousai); sucked down as they travel they trample and tread upon one another, this one striving to outstrip that. (248a)

Next to the tranquil, controlled motion of the gods, the human procession is frenzied. Those souls who best follow the gods and become images of them (eikasmene) share the most in common with the divine procession, including its calm, controlled motion. However, even these godlike souls are unsteady as they strain to see what is (ta onta). The less perfect the imitation of the god that the soul is and the less it is able to follow, the more extraneous motion is introduced into its flight. The struggle of each soul is compounded by those of the others, so as each one struggles against its own limitations it also becomes a danger to the others. As a result, “many are lamed, and many have their wings shattered, and for all their toiling they are balked, every one, of the full vision of being (ateleis… tes tou ontos thea), and departing therefrom, they feed upon the food of semblance (trophe doxaste)” (248b, translation modified).81 I will return shortly to the change in form (the shattered wings) and the change in diet (the substitution of “the food of semblance” for a “vision of being”) that accompany the soul’s exile from the heavens, for this is a crucial event in the life of the soul.

First, however, it is important to note that the soul’s failure is not due to a lack of effort or desire. Most souls are simply not able (adunateo) to reach the heights required for a full vision of the forms. In his description of the human procession, Socrates insists that the motion of every soul manifests an “eagerness”—glichomenai, a clinging to, striving after, longing for, in short, a desire—for the forms. This desire, which gives rise to the clamorous motion of the human procession, is the same desire that sets the divine procession into motion. Despite the difference in the character and outcome of these processions, Socrates consistently ties the motion of both types of soul back to their desire for the forms. Though Socrates explicitly notes this desire after his depiction of the divine procession, when he described “the care” that “every

81 I argue below that trophe doxaste (“the food of semblance”) is an allusion to the Sophists, for whom doxa (semblance, opinion, reputation) is an important concept. I will return to this issue below.
soul has… to receive its proper food” (247d); after he describes the human procession, he once again insists that the motion of the soul arises out of its desire for nourishment. “The reason… the (human) souls are fain and eager to behold the plane of Truth (to aletheias idein pedion),” he explains, “(is) that the pasturage that is proper to the noblest part of the soul (prosekousa psyches to aristo nome ek tou ekei) comes from that meadow and the plumage by which they are born aloft is nourished (trephetai) thereby” (248b, my emphasis). Socrates’ description of the human procession is, of course, redundant. Just a page before, Socrates had said as much about all souls, specifically marking the parallel between the human and the divine.

So, why does he press the issue once again? There would seem to be two reasons. First, the image of the soul as a chariot in pursuit of the forms should be understood as taking up Socrates’ definition of the soul as “self-motion.” Recall that after offering an unsatisfying “proof” of the soul’s immortality, Socrates had claimed to have “reveal(ed) precisely... (that) the essence and definition of the soul… (is) self-motion” (245e, pephasmenou tou uph’ heautou kinoumenou, psyches ousian te kai logon auton tis legon). When I discussed this definition previously, I noted that Socrates’ manner of arriving at it not only appears arbitrary, but that it is also not entirely clear what this definition means either in terms of his account of desire or in terms of the soul’s erga and pathe. The chariot image supplements this definition, telling a story that helps address these shortcomings.

The story of the procession portrays the soul not only as exhibiting a certain natural motion but it translates that motion into motivation, portraying the soul’s pursuit of the forms as manifesting its original/originary desire. The soul’s relation to the forms, Socrates suggests, is constitutive of the soul, because it is this relation—this desire for nourishment—that sets the soul into motion. If it is correct to suggest that the chariot’s pursuit of the forms provides a figure of the soul’s self-motion, then the defining characteristic of the soul, its motion, needs to be understood as arising out of its relation to the forms. This is why the desire for the forms is not only “original” in the sense of describing an initial state of the soul, but is originary in that desire gives raise to the soul as self-motion.

With this image Socrates turns his abstract definition of the soul as “self-motion” into a thoroughly erotic conception of the soul. It is no wonder then that he so consistently expresses concern over the form that his interlocutor’s desire takes. If it is the desire for the forms that sets the soul into motion, it this desire that makes the soul what it is. It is this desire that makes the soul a soul. Of course, if it is desire that constitutes the soul, setting it into motion, defining its relations and giving rise to its erga and its pathe, it follows that the domain of eros expands far beyond what we typically think of as “erotic.” Everything the soul does, everything the soul suffers, everything the soul is, is an erotic concern. All of the soul’s erga and pathe are

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82John Sallis responds to the initial definition of the soul as self-motion by noting, “the movement proper to the soul… remains in question in the present section. In fact, of the two kinds of movement that Socrates actually mentions—the movement of the whole heaven… and the movement of besouled bodies—neither is a movement of the soul. It leaves us entirely in the dark as to what kind of movement the soul can execute. But by alerting us to the overwhelming significance of the question of the soul’s movement, it prepares us for that showing forth of such movement that is about to commence in the great myth” (140). See also, Charles Griswold, who warns against treating the definition of the soul in isolation. “One must approach this controversial passage with consternation…. If the passage is extracted and treated as an independent venture into cosmology or physics, the prospects for finding much that is of interest in it are slim” (78).
understood in terms of desire and motion. This is why Socrates construes the task of his erotic speech so broadly as to require a definition of the soul and an account of its *erga* and *pathe.*

In addition to filling out the details of his definition, the myth’s equation of the soul’s self-motion with a desire for the forms introduces a strong, normative dimension into Socrates’ treatment of *eros.* The soul’s original and originary orientation towards the forms is best represented in the figure of its god, which will become a model of health, integrity and purity for every soul to emulate. Indeed, Socrates claims that the god is always already the implicit standard of the soul’s conduct in everything it does from its birth onwards. However, the soul only seems to become cognizant of this through the erotic encounter. At that point the soul’s ethical ideal—its god—begins to be viewed more explicitly as a model to imitate. Ideally, according to Socrates’ account, the disclosure of this model will make it more forceful, enabling it to direct the erotic encounter more effectively, turning the souls of the lover and his beloved towards their god and towards the forms while increasing their resemblance to both. We will get a better sense of the normative function of the soul’s orientation towards the forms when we look at Socrates’ description of the lover’s selection of his beloved, but first it is important to see how the soul’s vision of the forms and subsequent fall prepares the ground for the ethical project of becoming godlike.

*Images of Psychic Transformation: The Soul’s Many Births, the Soul’s Many Forms*

The emphasis that Socrates puts on motion helps to explain why he is wary of discussing the form of the human soul. If the human soul is defined by a certain type of motion, then it needs to be understood as an action or an event; not as thing, not as *that which is seen* (*eidos*). On this point, I wholeheartedly agree with Richard Bett’s position, that “The soul here is seen not as a thing which moves itself, but as itself a species of motion.”

What the myth of the chariot suggests is that the soul’s manner of becoming visible, its *eidos,* is an effect of *what happens.* What happens in the mythic prehistory of the soul, for instance, did the soul see the forms? Was it injured in its climb towards them? What happens in a man’s life? Does he conduct his erotic relationships in such a way as to foster his memory of the forms? Is this encounter marked by discipline? Does the lover become a likeness of his god or does he “go after the fashion of a four-footed beast, and beget offspring of the flesh… consort[ing] with wantonness… (without) fear or shame in running after unnatural pleasure” (250e)?

What the soul *does* and what it *suffers,* its *erga* and *pathe,* determines its form: if it glimpses the forms but then falls, it will take on a human form. However, if it discerns enough of the truth, it will not fall but will remain free of a body in the heavenly realm. Once embodied in human form, if the lover “goes after the fashion of a four-footed beast,” his soul just might enter a body that fits this behavior in his next life. However, if he conducts himself well, he can

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83 Plato’s Socrates consistently expands the domain of erotics so as to make it all-encompassing. In the *Gorgias,* erotics subsumes or becomes identical to the political *techne,* which is concerned with redirecting desire; in the *Phaedrus,* erotics subsumes rhetoric; and a similar expansion of the erotic domain takes place in the *Symposium* as well. There Diotima draws an analogy between the semantic range of the word *poiesis,* which can mean either “creativity” broadly (e.g., the work of craftsman) or “poetry,” and *eros,* which, she says, can refer to a special kind of *love* (the narrowly erotic) or “every desire for good things” (e.g., the love of making money, philosophy and so on) (205b).

84 Bett, Richard. “Immortality & the Nature of the Soul in the *Phaedrus,*” *Phronesis.* 31.1 (1986): 19. At the same time, I think that Bett risks betraying his insight when he insists throughout his article on referring to the soul as a sort of “immaterial ‘stuff’” (24, and elsewhere). He does so in order to solve the difficulty of how plural “first principles of motion” can be accounted for. That problem is beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, it seems to me that referring to the soul as “stuff” risks thinking of it in terms of a thing, and that we would be better served by a term such as “relation” (or even “desire,” which implies a relation) to refer to the soul.
“regain… her wings, and speed away” to the heavens (249a). The actual body, whether it is human or beastly, is just a symptom of the state of the soul just as the wings are an analogical register of its well-being; but what the soul’s movement between these bodies indicates is that its “form” is fluid.

Wings, the Soul’s Analogical Form. The critical event in the “life” of the human soul actually occurs before it is born into a human body. We have encountered some reference to this already. The event that marks the end of the soul’s participation in the heavenly procession and the beginning of its human life is its injury and fall from the heavens. Socrates describes this injury as occurring in one of two ways. In the confusion that attends the human procession, the soul is imperiled by violent collisions with other souls. “Many are lamed… many have their wings shattered,” and in any case, all depart from the heavens, deprived of a full vision of being (248b). This description of the soul’s fall from the heavens emphasizes the violence that it is subject to from without. The soul’s shattered wings and the other injuries that lame it result from its contact with other souls. That is not always the case, however. In addition to violence from without, simply being deprived of the nourishing vision of the forms is enough disrupt the soul’s flight, causing it to fall to the earth. Like violence from without, this deprivation (starvation) transforms of the soul. Indeed, the transformation affects the soul even more intimately, for, whereas external violence mutilates the soul’s wings, this disruption of the soul’s metabolism transforms it from within, causing it “to shed her wings and fall to earth” (248d). In either case, the loss of the soul’s wings causes it to fall into its human body.

This deprivation is a transformative event that will shape its entire life. This transformation is represented in more than one way. In terms of the mythic allegory, the soul’s failure to attain a full vision of the forms causes its wings to drop, malnourished from its body. This change in the soul’s “form” is an apt way of registering a disturbance of its self-motion, for the loss of its wings renders the soul unable to fly, and thus unable to strive after its god and the forms as before. This change in its form points to a perversion of the soul’s motion; unable to strive upward, toward the forms, the soul falls to earth, into its human body. This change in the form and motion of the soul is also represented as a change in the soul’s desire. Invoking one of Socrates’ fanciful etymologies, one might say that upward striving of the soul’s heavenly eros—its pteros, wings, as “the celestials call (it)” (252c)—is displaced by an eros that moves horizontally, striving towards objects within the earthly realm (252b). So, the loss of the soul’s wings registers a disturbance of its desire and motion, which reorients it towards objects—trophe doxaste—that are much more typically human.

The Disincarnate Soul & Its Bodies. The body where it lands registers the transformation of the soul in other terms. When the soul sheds its wings and falls to earth, the body in which it lands can then be read as a sign of its health. All souls that saw something of the forms but that failed to see them fully are born into a human body (248c, 249c). The significance of the human body as an indication of the soul’s health has to be understood in contrast to the body of the brute beast, on the one hand, and the disembodied soul, on the other. These represent a further fall and restoration of the soul, a further perversion and correction of its motion.

Though grammatically privative, “disembodied” represents anything but a privation. Rather, the disembodied soul is the soul that is full, both in the sense of being filled by the nourishing vision of the forms and full in the sense of being “complete,” its wings sustained by this vision. “Whatsoever soul has followed in the train of a god, and discerned something of the truth,” Socrates says, “shall be kept from sorrow (apemona) until a new revolution, and if she can do this always, she shall remain always free from hurt (ablabe)” (248c). The difficulty of
this task makes it extremely unlikely, of course, but Socrates allows for the happy possibility of the soul evading embodied existence altogether. There is a definite antagonism toward the body that is evident here. Socrates describes the soul’s escape from the body as an escape from harm. To be free of the body is to be free of sorrow and harm (apemona, ablabe). The absence of a body then silently testifies to the wellbeing of the soul.

By contrast, the soul’s fall towards its human body coincides with an influx of evil and forgetfulness. Instead of inpouring streams of nourishment, Socrates says, “(the soul that) sees none of (being)… is filled and weighed down with forgetfulness and evil” (248c, lethes te kai kai kai pleistheisa barunthe, translation modified). This is a curious choice of verbs, because what Socrates describes is an experience of privation (“seeing none”), but this loss is described in positive terms, as being “filled” (pleistheisa). The verb works well enough to describe the influx of kakia, but it seems strange to describe the soul as being filled with forgetfulness. Socrates, after all, does not seem to be getting at a more positive form of forgetting, like that described by psychoanalysis (e.g., repression). That said, this verb choice maintains a continuity with the depictions of the experiences of being filled with nourishment (251c-d) and with the description of Socrates’ contamination by alien discourses. The same verb and its cognates describe how Socrates is “filled” by the words of others as he prepares to give his first speech (235c-d, pleres pos, dia tes akoes peplerosthai me diken angeiou). Thus, Socrates suggests that his experience of being overrun by alien logoi is a part of this same experience of straying from desire’s true path. Like the discourse that pollutes Socrates’ soul, forgetfulness and evil drag the soul down, distancing it in time and space from the forms. This addition introduces a weight into the soul, making its return to its original motion and its proper nourishment more difficult.

Socrates reinforces the association of the body with harm and impurity again when he describes the final revelation of the forms to the disincarnate soul. Insisting that this vision sustains the integrity and purity of the soul, Socrates underscores the absence of the body from this scene:

whole and unblemished were we that did celebrate (the vision of the forms), untouched by evils (apatheis kakon) that awaited us in days to come; whole and unblemished likewise, free from alloy, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation; pure was the light that shone around us, and pure were we, without taint of that prison house (katharoi ontes kai asemantoi) which now we are encompassed withal, and call a body (soma). (250c, my emphasis)

The soul is sustained in its purity and integrity by the vision of the forms. Socrates makes this clear, on the one hand, by repeatedly invoking terms to describe wholeness and purity of the soul and the wholeness and purity of what it sees. Though less directly, the description of this scene continues to invoke the trope of nourishment by ascribing the same qualities to the soul as to the forms. The description shifts in chiastic fashion from the soul to the forms and from the forms (their light) back to the soul that receives it. Attributing the qualities of each to the other, Socrates implies that in the presence of the forms, the soul assimilates their character: The soul is described as “whole and unblemished,” so are the forms (holokleroi, holoklera); the spectacle is described as “steadfast (or unmoved) and blissful” (atreme kai eudaimona) and the soul is described as “untouched by evils” (apatheis kakon). “Pure was the light” (en auge kathara) of the forms and “pure were we” (katharoi ontes). While sustained by this vision, the soul is

85 It is worth noting how directly the description of the soul being “untouched” (apatheis) by evil answers Socrates’ call to describe the erga and pathe of the soul (245c).
portrayed as assimilating the qualities of integrity, wholeness and even *eudaimonia* from the
forms. The soul is buffeted from *kakia* and impurity that visit it through its human body.

In contrast to the soul that enjoys this revelation, the embodied soul is associated with
death and impurity. As before Socrates describes the soul’s fall into the body not only as
contaminating it and acquainting it with *kakia*, but he goes even further. The body itself is
treated as a site of suffering and death. If its health is sustained by the nourishing light the
forms, the body into which the soul falls casts the shadow of death over it. The soul is not only
“sullied” in the presence of the body (250e, *diephtharmenos*, “corrupted, destroyed”), but in a
play on words, Socrates suggests that the soul’s entrance into the body is an entrance into its
tomb. The soul is “unentombed” (*ASEMANTOI*) before its fall into the body (*SOMA*). ⁸⁶ If the body
is a tomb in which the soul is haunted by evils and pains (*kakia*, *blabe*, *pema*), the embodied soul
obviously does not fare as well as the disembodied one. The reason for this is also clear. In
terms of the trope of nourishment, the soul loses the food that is “pure” (250c) and “proper” to it
(250c, 247c-d). In place of the forms, which are the soul’s “proper nourishment” (247d, 248b,
“the pasturage proper to the best part of the soul”) and its only proper object of desire, the soul is
forced to subsist on “the food of semblance” (247c, *TROPE DOXA*). This substitution cannot but
compromise health and integrity of the soul, for, as we have seen, the soul assimilates the
qualities of what it discerns and feeds upon.

It is not surprising then to see that the loss of its proper nourishment will change the
character of the soul. That said, the soul that enters a human body fares better than the one that
falls into the body of a brute beast, because it retains some means—primarily *logos*—of turning
away from the food of *doxa* and returning to its lost vision of the forms. It is worth dwelling on
the distinction between “the food of semblance” and the nourishment proper to the soul, for this
distinction will be reflected in Socrates’ description of the soul’s changing character.

*Competing Diets: Proper Nutrition vs. the Food of Semblance (Trophe Doxaste)*

The distinction between the soul’s proper nourishment—“the plain of truth” (248b),
“pure knowledge” (247c), “what truly is” (247e, *TA ONTA ONTOS*)—and its substitute, *trophe
doxaste*, is both ontological and epistemological. When Socrates describes what feeds the soul in
the heavenly realm, he underscores the self-identity, purity and consistency of the forms. We
have just gotten a taste of this from Socrates’ description of the forms’ final revelation.
However, it is worth looking at another description of them in order to bring out their ontological
and epistemological dimensions. Describing the nourishment proper to the soul, Socrates says:

(The soul) discerns justice, its very self (*AUTEN DIKAIUSUNEN*), and likewise
temperance, and knowledge, not the knowledge that is neighbor to becoming and
varies with various objects to which we commonly ascribe being, but the veritable
knowledge of being that veritably is (*EPISTEMEN*, *OUK HE GENESIS PROSESTIN*, *OUD HE
ESTIN POU HETERA EN HETERA OUSA ON HEMIS NUN ONTON KALOUMEN, ALA TEN EN TO HO
ESTIN ON ONTON EPISTEMEN OUSAN*).… The soul contemplate(s)… and feast(s) upon
(these things) and all else that has true being (*TA ONTA ONTOS*). (247d-e, my
emphasis).

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⁸⁶ Hackforth’s translation, which refers to the soul being contained within a “prison house” is not inappropriate, for
the embodied soul lives under the threat of becoming a captive of alien discourses and desires. However, his
translation misses the association of the body with death, and it obscures the passage’s connection to other uses of
the *soma/sema* pun in Plato’s work. It is used, for instance, in Socrates’ exchange with Callicles just before he
introduces the image of the soul as a “jar” (*Gorgias* 493a).
In this context, Socrates makes many references to the “pure,” “true knowledge” (*episteme akerato*) that feeds the soul, so it is appropriate that he selects this form in particular to expand upon. However, we should not be misled into thinking that the forms are exclusively (or even primarily) an epistemological concern. Many in the analytical tradition, including G. B. Kerferd and Gregory Vlastos, have thought about the forms primarily in terms of how they articulate a certain image of knowledge. They certainly do that, but as a number of phenomenological or phenomenology-influenced readings of Plato have recently argued, they are more than an epistemological concern. Though it is significant that *episteme* is offered as the paradigmatic form, it is important to keep an eye towards their extra-epistemological implications.

The emphasis with which Socrates underscores the being of knowledge is striking. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a construction that could, in a few short words, associate knowledge with being more than Socrates’ reference to “the veritable knowledge of being that veritably is” (*ten en to ho estin on ontos epistemen ousan* — the redundancy is lost in the translation). This knowledge, which is not only rooted in being but which also refers to being, is characterized in largely negative terms. In particular, it is contrasted with the “knowledge” of becoming (*genesis*). This contrast allows Socrates to bring out the consistency and self-identity of the former in light of the fluctuating, unreliable character of the latter. To describe the knowledge of being, which Socrates also calls “true knowledge” and “pure knowledge,” one might also borrow the formulation that Socrates uses to describe “justice its very self” (*auten dikaisunen*); knowledge itself—*auten epistemen, knowledge that is emphatically the same as itself*—is contrasted with the knowledge that becomes different in different circumstances (*estin pou hetera en hetero ousa*). The fluctuating, unreliable character of this other “knowledge”—this knowledge which *is* different(ly)—is what, for Socrates, renders it undeserving of the title *episteme*. Just as we are mistaken to ascribe being to the varied objects of becoming (*hemis nun ontos kaloumen*), he says, we are wrong to call our familiarity with these objects “knowledge.”

Knowledge, that illuminating vision of the forms, is shadowed by an imposter, a sham knowledge that dons its appearance without sharing its qualities. The imposter neither refers to the same set of objects (the forms) nor does it exhibit the same stability as *episteme*. One gets a sense here of how Socrates’ depiction of *episteme* informs the practice of dialectic. If *episteme* refers to objects that are unchanging (Being)—objects which do not vary in varying circumstances—then it is no wonder that Socrates will not admit answers that understand experience as fluctuating and contradictory. Thus, when Protagoras, for instance, insists that “so diverse and multiform is goodness” that one cannot subsume all cases of goodness in a single, general principle as Socrates demands, but can only offer context-bound examples (*Prot* 394a-c), Socrates is bound to portray this as evasion. Protagoras’ “speech” is no way to answer a question (*Prot*. 333e, 334c), according to the image of *episteme* that underwrites the practice of dialectic. Protagoras’ answer, of course, does conform to that other realm of experience, that *other, fallen, false* “knowledge” that Socrates describes, but that is precisely what Socrates wants to move beyond.

What does Socrates call this imposter, this shadowy knowledge? If true knowledge coincides with our nourishing vision of what truly is (*ta onta ontos*), as Socrates suggests, then it is *doxa*—opinion, semblance, reputation—that belongs to and refers to this other realm of experience. This, of course, is the nourishment on which the fallen soul is forced to subsist (*trophe doxaste*).

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Before Socrates describes the soul’s fall to earth and subsistence on *trophe doxaste*, he anticipates the contrast between *episteme* and *doxa*. On the one hand, when Socrates insists that “pure knowledge nourishes” the soul (*episteme akerato trephomene*), he identifies *episteme* with the vision of the forms. At the same time, he implicitly opposes “pure knowledge” to rival forms of nourishment (*trophe*) and to *impure forms of knowledge* (*doxa*). On the other hand, the formula by which Socrates distinguishes true knowledge from its double already represents this other, *impure knowledge* as exhibiting the qualities of opinion (*doxa*). Socrates’ description the object of this pseudo-knowledge highlights two important features of *doxa*. First, the description testifies to the role that opinion plays in our approach to objects of becoming. The varied objects of appearance are those that we approach through *doxa*. *Doxa* here seems to have both private and public sides. *Doxa* refers to the object’s appearance to the individual (e.g., its appearance through the senses). At the same time, *doxa*, which can also be translated, “reputation” (“that to which we commonly ascribe being”), names the public appearance of an object. As “reputation” *doxa* describes the object as it appears to a community and as it is represented in a communal voice—when we speak as a “we” (*kaloumen*). *Doxa* then refers to the object’s appearance to a community, including its appearance in language, as well as to its appearance to the individual.

At the same time, the distinction that Socrates makes between what we mistakenly say has being (*on hemis nun onton kaloumen*) and what truly has it (*ta onta ontos*) emphasizes the disparity between *doxa* and becoming, on the one hand, and *episteme* and being, on the other. In very similar language, Socrates will repeatedly insist upon the distance between being and becoming, as when he distinguishes “beauty itself” (*auto to kallos*) from “that which is so-called here” (250e, *autou ten tede eponumian*, translation modified). This rift, which is inscribed in the distance of the soul’s fall from the heavenly procession, is also attested to in similar, though less discursive terms when Socrates distinguishes between “the beauty of this world” and “true beauty” (249e). The distinction between being and becoming, *episteme* and *doxa*, is reiterated again when the objects of *doxa/becoming* are described as “copies” or “likenesses” (*eikonas, homoimasin*) of “that which is imaged” (250b, *eikasthentos*)—i.e., the forms. What the last iteration of the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* bring out particularly well is the variety of *doxa*. While the original is always singular (“beauty itself,” “justice itself,” and so on), its appearances in *doxa* multiply. The worldly manifestation of “that which is imaged,” whether it is beauty or justice or something else, varies in varied circumstances (*hetera en hetero*).

As we have seen (and will see again), Socrates frequently expresses disdain for the appearances populating the world of *doxa*. His angst seems to stem in part from his sense that these appearances are impure and adulterated. They are “less real” than those prized qualities of which they are likenesses. It is important to note, however, that Socrates’ antagonism does not arise exclusively on ontological grounds. It is not simply that he condemns worldly objects for failing to fully realize the virtues that they exhibit. Rather, Socrates’ concern over the objects of *doxa/becoming*, like his anxiety about *logos* and *eros*, centers on their effect upon the soul. It is still an ontological issue but it is also an ethical issue, because it is the being of the soul that concerns Socrates more than the being of those potential objects of knowledge and desire.

**Competing Diets & Arts of Care: Plato vs. Gorgias.** In terms of the trope of nourishment, the *doxa* that the soul is forced to feed upon would appear to be the psychic equivalent of “empty calories.” The distinction between “pure knowledge” (247d), which is the soul’s proper nourishment (248b, *prosekousa psyches to aristo nome*), and *trophe doxaste* recalls Socrates’ schematization of the “art of caring for the soul” in the *Gorgias*. There Socrates compared the rhetorician and the philosopher to a pastry chef and a doctor, respectively,
suggesting that what the latter pair are to the body, the rhetorician and the philosopher are to the soul (Gorgias 464b-465d). The pastry chef’s “art” (really, emperia, an untheorized “skill” developed by experience), Socrates tells Polus, “takes no thought at all of what is best (tou men beltiston)... (but) with the lure of what’s most pleasant (to de aei hedisto) at the moment, it sniffs out folly and hoodwinks it” (464d).\(^8\) Sacrificing the good (to beltiston) in their pursuit of fleeting pleasures (hedone), the pastry chef and (unreformed) rhetorician sacrifice their patients’ bodily and psychic health, Socrates says. Socrates does not specifically mention any “art of care” in the Phaedrus, but the comparison to the Gorgias is appropriate. For, when he mentions trope doxaste, Socrates is not only worried about what will or will not nourish the soul, but this concern is described as central to the soul’s care for itself. “Now even as the mind of a god is nourished by pure knowledge,” Socrates says, “so also is it with every soul that has a care to receive her proper food (kai apases psyches... mele to prosekon deksasthai)” (247d, my emphasis). The word Socrates uses to describe the soul’s care for its proper nourishment, mele, is a cognate of the epimelia that Socrates discusses in the Gorgias, when he describes his political art (philosophy) as an art of caring for the soul.

Indeed, the distinction between these two forms of nourishment in the Phaedrus seems to reproduce the distinction between hedone and to beltiston of the Gorgias. The distinction not only diagnoses the possible danger that trope doxaste poses to the health of the soul, but, like the Gorgias’ treatment of hedone, the Phaedrus ties the danger of trope doxaste specifically to the ever-shifting and deceptive qualities of appearance. The contrast between episteme and doxa, in Phaedrus, reproduces the Gorgias’ suspicion that bodily pleasures offer only “masks” and “alien charm(s)” (Gorgias 464e, 465b), which threaten to throw “all things... (into) indiscriminate confusion” (Gorgias 465d). As we will see, the Gorgias’ “art of care” gets reconfigured in the Phaedrus as psychagoga, which fits better with definition of the soul as self-motion. Nevertheless, this art of “leading the soul,” which is what philosophical eroticism is, is not only transformative (as is the Gorgias’ political techne), but it thematizes the necessity leading the soul out of a state in which the motion/desire that is proper to it is threatened with indiscriminate confusion.

In the Phaedrus too, we see that this care is bound up very intimately with the soul’s desire. In fact, “care” in this context is another word for the originary desire that sets the soul into motion after the forms. Just as in the Gorgias then, desire is central to Socrates’ discussion of the care of the soul in the Phaedrus. In the Gorgias, as we saw in chapter one, Socrates distinguished his practice of caring for souls from that of the great Athenian statesmen by insisting that he will not gratify just any desire or pleasure whatsoever, but only those that conform to “what is best” (to beltiston). What we will see in the Phaedrus is that the soul’s care for itself—its care to receive what is proper (prosekon) to it, its desire for the forms—provides a mythological model for understanding and acting upon desire.

\(^8\) This passage is difficult to translate. The term that is translated “pastry chef,” he opsopoike, appears to refer to one who specializes in the cooking of meats (Boyarin 2007 187, note 43). For this reason, Boyarin suggests that “pastry chef” is the worst translation because he cooks everything but breads, but I think Boyarin is too literal. I prefer Donald J. Zeyl’s translation of this passage, which uses “pastry chef” as opposed to “cook” (W.D. Woodhead), because the work of a pastry chef more obviously divorces pleasure from nutrition (to beltiston, the good); and that disconnect is precisely what concerns Plato here. Zeyl’s translation appears in Plato on Rhetoric & Language. Ed. Jean Nienkamp, Hermagoras Press: Mahwah, NJ. 1999 (85-162). W.D. Woodhead’s translation appears in Plato: The Collected Dialogues. Eds. Hamilton, Edith and Huntington Cairns, Princeton UP: Princeton, NJ. 1989 (229-307).
This model of desire is a model of care, so when Socrates articulates it in the *Phaedrus*, he should be understood as taking back up the dialogue with Gorgias. Plato not only has Socrates raise the same set of issues as appear in the *Gorgias*, bringing us back, in particular, to the issue of choosing between competing desires and pleasures; but there is also a clear allusion to Gorgias himself in the phrase *trophe doxaste*.

Indeed, there are many reasons to understand Gorgias as a target here. However, the most important is that the problem that occupies Gorgias’ *Helen*—the question of how *eros* and *logos* attenuate the subject’s agency—also occupies the *Phaedrus*. *Doxa*, which we see in the phrase *trophe doxaste*, is a crucial term in Gorgias’ problematization of agency. Stressing the limits of human knowledge, Gorgias says, “If everyone, on every subject, possessed memory of the past and <understanding> of the present and foreknowledge of the future, *speech would not be equally <powerful>” (11, my emphasis). However, this is not the case. Gorgias argues that men do not possess hard and fast knowledge, so they must make do with *doxa*. Unfortunately, *doxa*, “being slippery and unreliable, brings slippery and unreliable success” (12). This is crucial to his problematization of Helen’s agency because, Gorgias argues, this epistemological state is what opens the soul to persuasion/compulsion. Men’s reliance on *doxa* (semblance, opinion, reputation) causes them, like Helen, “(to) come under the influence of speech” and act “against (their) will as if... seized by the violence of violators” (12). If one knew everything there was to know, speech would have no effect; but that is not the case. Lacking the *episteme* that would render persuasion superfluous, men experience *logos* as an overwhelmingly powerful force. So, it is this state of being immersed in *doxa*, of lacking anything solid or reliable to which one might tether one’s thinking and actions, which renders the soul vulnerable to compulsion by foreign *logoi*.

Socrates’ depiction of *doxa* conforms in many respects to Gorgias’. Socrates portrays the soul that falls from the heavens as awash in a sea of semblances, appearances and opinions. This condition is manifest in the cacophony of voices that are heard inhabiting the background—and occasionally, also the speakers—at the start of the *Phaedrus*. I will show in the next section that for Socrates too, it is through *doxa* that the soul’s volition and desire become problematic. There is a crucial difference, however. The Platonic treatment of *doxa* and the attendant problematization of *eros* and *logos* differ from that of Gorgias, because Socrates understands *doxa* in contrast to different sort of *episteme*. Whereas for Gorgias *episteme* would consist of a thoroughgoing knowledge of the past, the present and the future, for Plato’s Socrates, *episteme* has an entirely different set of referents. It concerns an otherworldly vision of being (justice itself, temperament itself, beauty itself, and so on). This is a completely different horizon, populated by different entities than the world to which Gorgias refers. Not only do knowledge and *doxa* take different referents in these texts, but where, for Gorgias, there is no *episteme* and so no escaping *doxa*; the same is not true of Plato’s Socrates.

G.R.F. Ferrari makes an apt observation that is relevant here. “By thinking about the soul,” Ferrari says, “we can change our souls – in other words, the soul is able to change itself by virtue of its own proper activity, thought – and this change will have consequences for the furniture of the world we inhabit, and which we like to rearrange.” In this case, one might

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89 For example, the palinode is not only Socrates’ response to two paradoxical *encomia* like Gorgias’ *Helen*; but it can be argued that the failure of Socrates’ encomium to praise its object makes it even more closely resemble Gorgias’ *Helen*. (Phaedrus’ charge that Socrates did not complete his encomium, because he failed to praise the non-lover directly echoes Isocrates’ charge that Gorgias failed to praise Helen).

suggest that Gorgias and Plato not only have differently arranged furniture, but that the *Phaedrus* imports furniture—the objects of Parmenidean thought, *episteme*, the forms—that Gorgias had explicitly dispatched with in *Helen* and *On Nature or the Non-Existent*. The question that this prompts one to ask is how the reintroduction of these entities affects the way that soul moves through its differently populated world. How is the soul differently freed, constricted or empowered in its relationships by constantly referring its movement/desire to the forms?

An important upshot of the introduction of the forms is that where Gorgias represents *logos* and *eros* as entangling the soul in an intractable set of power relations through *doxa*; the *Phaedrus*’ myth establishes a standard of desire and motion by which Socrates is able to distinguish those desires and *logoi* that subject the soul to alien impulses from those that do not. When he reorients the soul towards the forms, Socrates suggests, he is able to disentangle the soul from the relations that bind it, thus freeing it to return to its original and proper motion. This is still represented as exposing the soul to a certain amount of otherness, because the effect of this intervention is to change the soul’s empirical form—to change the *pathe* and *erga* in which it is involved. However, the myth portrays this as a return of the soul to itself rather than as a fundamental break in who it is.

It is absolutely necessary to understand the problem of *doxa* in tandem with the problem(s) of the soul’s self-motion, desire, and ultimately, identity. The soul that is awash in *doxa* is awash in multiplying and conflicting images of what it desires. Such is the soul’s experience the world of *doxa* and becoming. In the contrast between world of *doxa*, which is accessible to the senses, and “(the place where) true being dwells, without color or shape, (which) cannot be touched” (247c), we see Plato’s Parmenidean streak. We get a sense of this when Socrates initially makes the distinction between being and becoming. The instability of *doxa*—that “knowledge” which is always becoming different in different contexts—reflects the instability of the process of becoming.

The soul itself is not exempt from this process, not even as it approaches the forms in the heavenly procession. It is important to note the resemblance between Socrates’ description of *doxa* and his initial, mythological characterization of the soul. When Socrates distinguishes *episteme* from that ‘knowledge,’ “(which) is neighbor to becoming (genesis) and varies with various objects” (*estin pou hetera en hetero ousa*), one cannot help but to be struck by the resemblance between the description of *doxa* and Socrates’ description of the soul. When Socrates first shifted to an image-based discourse, he described the soul as “always becoming different in different forms” (246b, *psyche*… *alloi* en *allois* *eidesi gignomene*). There is a slight shift in terminology. The difference that is manifest in *doxa* and in the soul is called *heteros* and *allos*, respectively, but these passages clearly echo one another. The resemblance is underscored by the construction, which repeats a key attribute (of the soul and *doxa*), joining it to its reiteration by the preposition *en* (*alloi* en *allois*, *hetera en hetero*). The soul is not just a “neighbor to becoming” (genesis), is becoming itself (gignomene) as it traverses the heavens, taking on and sloughing off different bodies. This is why the soul is able to assimilate the qualities of the forms. This is why the soul is able to become a likeness of its god (*eikasmene*). The soul’s participation in *genesis*—its capacity for change—is what makes it perfectible. At the same time, however, this capacity opens it up to the influence of *doxa*.

In this respect, I find it necessary to supplement Richard Bett’s treatment of the *Phaedrus*’ conception of the soul. In “Immortality & the Nature of the Soul in the *Phaedrus*,” Bett attributes to the soul the same ontological status as the forms. Comparing the *Phaedrus’*
treatment of the soul with those of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Richard Bett argues, “(the) final destiny (of the soul) consists not of freedom from all change”—as in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*—“but of constant, albeit regular, motion” (21). This understanding, which incorporates change (*genesis*) into the life of the soul, Bett argues, forces us to rethink a simple division between *Being* and *Becoming*. “While the *Phaedo/Republic* conception of a schism between Being and Becoming is maintained,” Bett argues, the criterion for the division can no longer be quite the same. For as I said earlier, I presume that at every stage Plato would have held that the soul is a “thing which is”; but if so, changelessness can no longer be a necessary condition for Being— for as we have seen, the soul, even in its true nature, is no longer changeless. Plato does not explicitly tell us that the soul is an *on*; indeed, he seems to restrict the title to the Forms. However, he does say that the soul “feasts on” and “is nourished by” *to on*; and the metaphor of nourishment must, I take it, imply that the nature of the soul is not basically alien from that which nourishes it—in other words, that the soul, too, is an *on*. (Bett 21)

While I largely agree with Bett, I think it is necessary to question the assumption that the soul should be treated as belonging to the realm of *being*. Obviously, I also take the metaphor of nourishment to be important to understanding the *Phaedrus*’ treatment of the soul. However, while I agree that the palinode points to an intimacy of the soul with the forms—such that it can assimilate their qualities; we cannot forget that the same metaphor, *trophe doxaste*, indicates the soul’s involvement with *doxa* and *becoming*. The dual application of the nourishment trope then, suggests that the soul cannot be cleanly aligned with one side of the ontological divide or the other. Rather, the soul would seem to belong to the realms of both *being* and *becoming* or to neither, in which case the soul might be thought of as occupying a between-state (like the *daemons* or the cicadas of *Phaedrus* or the lover of *Symposium*).

Indeed, the metaphor of nourishment testifies to the different effects that are wrought by the different forms of nourishment that the soul feasts on. While feasting upon the forms, as Bett suggests, the soul is animated by a constant, regular motion. However, in the world of *doxa*, where beauty and justice and the other qualities prized by the soul appear refracted in a myriad of incomplete and impure manifestations, the soul itself is also refracted. There is a change in the motion and desire of soul. In contrast to its actions (*erga*) in the divine procession—its focused, singular pursuit of the forms—in the world of *doxa*, the soul’s energies are dispersed in numerous directions, towards too many objects of desire. The transformations the soul experiences likewise no longer tend toward the simple and self-identical, but become manifold, causing it to assimilate the shifting, conflicted quality of *doxa*. This is what it means for the soul to be corrupted.

**Suffering Doxa & Death: The Soul’s Journey through the (Under)World**

The soul’s original desire and motion are never lost entirely. For, if the soul is defined as self-motion such a loss would constitute its death, and Socrates insists that the soul is immortal. The soul nevertheless suffers a sort of death. As it enters into its tomb/body, the soul suffers a disruption and transformation of its self-motion. When its desire for the forms is refracted through its surroundings, its motion follows. Thus, the soul not only experiences death when it is parted from its body (the death of the *zoon*), but, more fundamentally, it experiences death in the life of the *zoon*, when it is born into its tomb (*Gorgias* 492e, *Phaedrus* 250c). It experiences death in those desires that overcome it and compel it to chase after the various objects that stand in for its *true* object of desire (*ta onta ontos*). Its new body, a new weight (*baros*), burdens the
soul with relentless needs and desires whose impetuous force sends the soul scrambling after multiplying objects of desire, none of which are quite what the soul \textit{really} wants.

This experience is especially troublesome, for the soul is not only subjected to what is foreign to it (alien, new desires and objects), but like Gorgias’ Helen, the soul misinterprets this subjection as the fulfillment of its inmost desire. So, without even knowing it, the soul loses itself, confusing the desires and motions proper to it with those that are not. Socrates suggests that one can easily spend one’s entire life serving these new desires, whether they are for food or drink or sex, without “raising one’s head” to look beyond them toward true “prized possessions of the soul” (250a, \textit{timia psychais})—“that which truly is” (249c, \textit{anakupsasa eis onontos}).

As an extreme manifestation of this subjection to one’s desires (and the attendant confusion) one might refer to Callicles’ ethical ideal of the “strong man” in the \textit{Gorgias}. This man fosters his desires so that they become as large as possible, and he strives to meet them without regard to whether they conform to the good. Callicles argues that this man embodies natural justice and power. Socrates, however, inverts Callicles’ picture, arguing that without knowing it, this man leads a life of perpetual slavery. Callicles’ strong man is Socrates’ “undisciplined man,” who, goaded by the pangs of deprivation, “is ever compelled (\textit{anangkazdoito d’ aei}) to spend day and night” striving to complete the Sisyphean task of filling his leaky jars (\textit{Gorgias} 493e). In contrast to the soul’s desire and self-motion in the palinode’s heavenly procession, which takes one object and moves, as best it can, in one direction, the motion and desire of the undisciplined man is dispersed. Always pulled in a thousand directions, towards a thousand different objects of desire, the undisciplined man is subjected to a myriad of masters. This man loses himself and his proper self-motion in his frantic service to his desires.

Callicles’ ideal is extreme, but, Socrates suggests, it says something about the condition in which most people spend their lives. It is worth recalling that in the \textit{Gorgias} Socrates condemns Pericles and most all Athenian statesmen on the basis that they have encouraged in the Athenian population the very same undiscerning, insatiable desire that Callicles advocates. This, he says, is what sets his “political art” apart. “The good” provides him with a standard beyond pleasure to use while selecting what desires to cultivate and curb. In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Socrates also insists that the vast majority of people spend their lives enthralled by petty, incessant desires—what he calls “the busy doings of mankind” (249d). Failing to gaze beyond the immediate objects of their desire, the energies and pursuits of most souls, like Callicles’ hero, remain dispersed in the countless objects of daily concern.

In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Socrates also sketches a quick portrait of a man who more closely approximates Callicles’ hero than most. This is the man “whose vision of the mystery is long past, or whose purity has been sullied” (250e). Like Callicles’ “strong man” this character is a slave of his desires. “When he beholds what is called beautiful here,” Socrates says, “he looks upon it with no reverence, and \textit{surrendering to pleasure, he essays to go after the fashion of the four-footed beast}, and to beget offspring of the flesh, or consorting with wantonness he has no fear nor shame in \textit{running after} unnatural pleasure” (250e, my emphasis). This man-become-animal manifests the same beastly intensity as Callicles’ hero. Goaded by desires that he is unable to resist, he spends his time groping after flesh. In contrast to the upward movement of properly-directed desire, notice how the “four-footed” lover’s desire pulls him closer to the ground.

The “four-footed” lover’s subjection appears more violent than those who are absorbed in “the busy doings of mankind,” but they share something essential in common, their blinkered vision. It is this man’s failure to look up toward the forms that renders him incapable of
mastering his desires. Like the four-footed beast he keeps his head low to the ground, so he is unable to see anything beyond the object that moves him. Unable to recognize that “what is called beauty here” is a likeness of “beauty itself,” he overvalues what only partially instantiates his desire and approaches the copy without any of the fear or shame or reverence the original inspires. So, Socrates says, the “sullied” lover, like the multitude and Callicles’ “strong man,” is perpetually lost to himself. Subjected to shifting desires, all these figures are pulled along by whatever desirable object happens across their paths.

**Breaking the Bonds of Doxa – Reorienting the Soul.** There is something crucial in this act of “raising one’s head” towards the forms. This change in the soul’s posture breaks the spell by which the object of desire takes hold of it. It changes one’s vision of the world by turning one’s head from the realm of *doxa* to that of being and *episteme*; it changes how one experiences desire by bringing into view desire’s true object; and, in doing so, it changes how the soul pursues its desire. The reorientation of the soul, thus transforms the self-motion by which it is defined. However, this act is rare. Most remain ensnared by the *doxa* to which desire binds them. When the rare man does look up, Socrates insists, this act sets him apart from the multitude and garners their scorn. They charge that he is “out of his wits,” “demented,” and so on (249d, e). This reaction in itself indicates how transformative this change in the orientation of the soul is. When the soul lifts its gaze above its immediate object of desire and fixes it on the forms, Socrates says, it is transformed enough to appear manifestly different to the community.

As Socrates makes repeated recourse to this change in posture, he underscores the profundity of the change that it initiates. Socrates first mentions the soul’s posture when he describes the heavenly procession. From the start, the raised head is the mark of the exceptional soul. “That (soul) which best follows (its) god and becomes a likeness thereof,” Socrates says, “raises her charioteer’s head into the outer region (248a, *hupereren eis ton ekso topon ten tou*).

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91 It is worth noting that the word for “sullied” or “corrupted” here is *diaphtrein*. According to Kenneth Dover, “(this) is used, when it has a personal object, of causing people to behave, feel or think in ways which impair their performance of their roles in the community, and so of seducing a married woman (e.g. Lys. i. 16), bribing a judge” and so on” (48). The word frequently comes up in erotic contexts, as it does here, but there is something curious about its use in the *Phaedrus*. The issue is that the *Phaedrus* will testify to the existence of two communities—the *polis* and the philosophical community—and the “proper” use of *eros*, to create the philosophical community, involves a withdrawal from the *polis*. The proper use of *eros*, philosophically, then actually constitutes a corruption of the citizen from the perspective of the *polis*. I will return to this in the next chapter.

92 The *Republic*’s exploration of education in the “Allegory of the Cave” employs a similar trope (of turning) and situates the soul in a similarly vertical topography. The imagery there differs, but Socrates repeatedly emphasizes the need to reorient the soul, turning it away from the shadows of the cave, towards the good. “When one of (the prisoners) was untied, and compelled suddenly to stand up, turn his head, start walking, and turn towards the light, he’d find all these things painful” (515c); “This capacity in every soul, this instrument by means of which each person learns, is like an eye which can only be turned away from darkness and towards the light by turning the whole body. The entire soul has to turn with it, away from what is coming to be, until it is able to bear the sight of what is, and in particular, the brightest part of it... the good” (518c, my emphasis); “We are not dealing here, by the looks of it, with something like the *spin of a coin*, but with the *turning of a soul* away from that day which is a kind of night, and towards the day which is the ascent to what is, and which we shall say is true philosophy” (521c, see also, 515e, 518e, 519b). Plato. *The Republic*. Ed. G. R. F. Ferrari. Trans. Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Luce Irigaray’s reading of this scene in *Speculum of the Other Woman* does well to emphasize the violence of this procedure. “The man is forced to get up, turn his head and walk. As if that were possible, all at once, without recourse to another trick: the suggestive force of a tutor who pays no heed to the resistance of the body to this brutal tropism. Thus all these acts will hurt and, obliged to look up, both overhead and backward, toward the light... the prisoner-child will be blinded by the fire’s glare, and his dazzled eyes will no longer be able to make out the “things” whose shadows he had earlier gazed at” (269). Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the other Woman*. Trans. Gillian Gill. Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1985.
heniokou kephalen). In its context, this detail is inconspicuous because it follows the much more striking claim that the soul becomes a likeness of its god. However, as Socrates makes repeated recourse to the act of “raising one’s the head,” it assumes an increasing significance. After the soul’s fall from the heavens, this change in posture comes to describe the way in which the soul’s recollection of the forms transforms the world that it lives in and the life it leads.

Still, it has to be asked how this transformation can be initiated. Given the force of those desires that bind the soul to its various objects, what has the power to loosen their hold enough to allow it to escape? What has the power to prompt the soul to lift its head towards the forms to begin with? Part of the answer, no doubt, has to do with the experience of the particular soul prior to its fall into its body. When Socrates describes “(the) first birth” of the soul that has glimpsed the forms, he says, “she shall not be planted in any brute beast” (248c). Every human is human by virtue of its vision of the forms. Of course, the amount of the forms that each has seen varies, and the ease or difficulty that it experiences in turning from the doxic object of desire to the true object of its desire (being, the forms) depends upon quality of that vision.93

Nevertheless, there are two experiences that all human souls share that are powerful enough to break the spell of doxic desire. Both depend upon the vision of the forms. These are the experiences whose force Socrates has testified to from the start of the dialogue: the pathe of logos and of kallos. The dialogue testifies to their power throughout. Indeed, Socrates has suggested that he has been overcome by both—Phaedrus’ beauty and anonymous logos—over the course of the Phaedrus. When he describes the soul that makes the proper use of its desire, lifting its head towards the forms, Socrates again insists that logos and kallos are powerful forces that stream into the soul, setting it into motion in spite of itself. What Socrates adds in the palinode is that though logos and kallos break in on the soul from without, they are both capable of turning the soul, so that it looks beyond the proximate objects of its desire and vision, the forms. Because they encroach upon the soul in this manner, Socrates suggests, kallos and logos are capable of purifying the motion of the soul.

Logos & Kallos – Purifying the Motion of the Soul

[A] Logos. In passages that closely parallel one another, Socrates attributes to both logos and kallos (more specifically, beautiful images) the capacity to purify the soul by turning its gaze to its proper object and returning its motion to its mythic, upward path. This description of the effect of logos and kallos supports Marina McCoy’s contention that the philosopher’s desire for the forms needs to be understood as the definitive aspect of his character and rhetoric. McCoy does not discuss the issue of purification per se, but she discusses the philosopher, and in the Phaedrus, he models purity in his character and in his speech. “The philosopher is someone who is “turned toward” the forms as the object of his love; his stance is a moral rather than simply an intellectual position. Plato suggests that the understanding of our own desires grounds our

93 Socrates lays out hierarchical, nine-tiered typology of souls based upon how much of the forms they saw. Drawing a correlation between the soul’s vision of the forms and its vocation in life, Socrates says, “the soul that hath seen the most of being… shall grow into a lover of wisdom or a lover of beauty or a follower of the muses and a lover” (248c-d). He then describes descending types, whose desires, erga and pathe, are less and less informed by a vision of the forms. Sophists, demagogues and tyrants round out the bottom. If the soul’s way of experiencing and acting upon desire depends upon the quality of its previous vision of the forms, this vision will certainly affect its ability to shift its attention from the desirable objects of doxa to the forms. As the typology suggests, this will in turn fundamentally change the way the soul lives.

94 I borrow this formulation from David M. Halperin’s “Plato & Erotic Reciprocity,” Classical Antiquity, 5:1 (1986: Apr), 60-80, which argues that for Plato, object-choice is transferential, in that it is displaced from the original to so many surrogates.
theoretical outlook on the world and, in turn, our rhetoric is guided by our moral-theoretical vision (of the forms)” (McCoy 6). The philosopher’s orientation toward the forms, an orientation which his speech strives to reproduce in his interlocutor, McCoy suggests, has important ethical consequences. I could not agree more, but I want to supplement McCoy’s characterization of philosophical rhetoric and eroticism by indicating some of the more concrete behaviors that this orientation toward the forms gives rise to. Though McCoy suggests that “Plato closely connects moral virtues such as wisdom, courage, openness to criticism, and self-knowledge to love of a transcendent good outside of oneself” (6), her analysis still tends to focus on the intellectual life of the philosopher when the implications of this orientation are more far-reaching. I want to explore how the particular understanding of desire that emerges from the Phaedrus’ myth structures the philosopher’s relationship to his community and the logoi of others, to his beloved, and to his sensuous experience.

As we have seen, the soul’s relation to the forms is described as the most important aspect of its lot as a human. When Socrates reiterates his position that “only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into our human form” (249b), he insists that the distinctively human activity of language (logos) derives from the soul’s vision of the forms. “Only the soul that has beheld truth,” Socrates says,

(can) understand the language of the forms (eidos legomenon), passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning (ek pollon ion aistheseon eis en logismo sunairoumenon)—and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now appear to us to be (nun einai phamen), and gazing up to that which truly is (anakupsa eis to on ontos).

(249b-c, translation modified)

In Socrates’ description of the human soul’s capacity for language, we can discern how it is that logos, which is so frequently experienced as invading and contaminating the soul, can also purify it. If it is the vision of the forms that nourishes the soul and sustains its purity before birth, it is logos that largely takes over that role for the embodied soul. Insofar as logos is memory, it acts as a relay that restores to the soul its lost, nourishing vision of the forms. When logos gathers many perceptions into one (pollon… aistheseon eis en), it turns the mind from the multiplicity of sensible objects in the present (doxa) to the singular vision of its eidetic past (“what truly is,” to on ontos, “that place which our souls beheld aforetime,” pot’ eiden hemon he psyche).

Why does Plato’s Socrates treat the power of logos as being grounded in memory? Socrates does not spend much time answering this question, but the suggestion seems to be that memory is already at work in the recognition of multiple perceptions as exhibiting one, common quality. John Sallis helps clarify, “an eidos is, in the first instance, the one of a gathering, a one into which and according to which many things made present to the senses are gathered” (50). The key phrase here is “according to which,” for what Sallis indicates with it is that the soul’s memory of eidos—its memory of what was seen—is implicitly at work when logos organizes what one sees at present. Logos draws upon a remembered standard to organize and understand present experience. Logos then is not to be understood as abstracting the general from the particular in a straightforward way, but as always already having comprehended the sensible. In this case, logos is also not understood as productive in the sense that it produces new categories

95 I also want to question the supposition that one either loves a transcendent good (i.e., one that is ahistorical and independent of human agents) or one falls into solipsistic isolation. I return to this issue in chapter five’s discussion of philosophical eroticism.
or truths for which the speaker is responsible. Rather, logos always turns towards the past as it attempts to discern its previous vision in the present.

The reason for tying logos to memory, Sallis suggests, is that logos always brings the past to bear upon the present. There would seem to be two ways of understanding this relation to the past, and both appear to be operative in the Platonic text. In one sense, memory testifies to the power of tradition and traditional discourses. The principle that logos silently invokes as it gathers the present, recognizing some perceptions as being alike but not others, testifies to the ongoing power of tradition. “By being gifted with speech, by being already caught up in logos,” Sallis writes, “man always already has available an already accomplished, anonymous collecting of many into ones, a collecting which he resumes in his speaking” (151). Through logos the past continues to organize our present, repeating past judgments, orderings and valuations. When we call some objects and actions beautiful, moderate, just, wise and so on, Sallis suggests, we take over the value-laden “gatherings” of the past.

The dialogue does not thematize this type of “gathering” or organizing of experience at that point, but the drama that attends Socrates’ first speech illustrates this issue. The invasion of Socrates by the words of the poets dramatizes how the logoi of the past continue to haunt the present. When the words of Sappho, Anacreon, et al well up inside of Socrates, prompting his first speech—which, of course, he later disowns and tries to exorcise—they subject him to their will. This is more than a matter of their reproduction. At issue is that poets’ words organize his understanding of erotic phenomena. Construing all madness as bad, they order their audience, including the speaker himself, to favor the non-lover. Subjecting the speaker who utters them to their judgment, the logoi of tradition orient him to a world of their understanding.

This concern with the power of the tradition, which logos brings to bear upon the present, is the same problem that Gorgias’ Helen addresses. Gorgias frames his whole text in terms of the ongoing power of traditional discourses (doxa). He does not describe how classes of objects are formed (i.e., how many are gathered into one), but he does describe how, through repetition, associations are forged between objects and concepts. Thus, the name “Helen” (Helenen) has been joined so often to the calamities of the Trojan War as to become a synonym (homophonos) for them, such that Helen’s name cannot be repeated without evoking the horror of the war.

The formulation of this problem in the Phaedrus, however, has one very important difference. The myth that Socrates tells, regarding the procession of souls and their otherworldly vision of the forms, represents memory as something more than a social artifact. Indeed, the myth not only situates truth outside of the individual (as McCoy notes), but it removes memory from the social sphere altogether, thus placing the true objects of desire and source of values outside of society and history. Memory, in this sense, does not consist of the anonymous collections of tradition. Rather, memory would seem to refer to the soul’s connection to that unchanging ground of all value, the forms. In this sense, memory is still connected to tradition and traditional logoi, but it is as the unchanging ground which a given tradition approximates. Memory then is the vision of the forms that grounds tradition (now understood as better or worse approximation of the forms), and it is what offers the soul the opportunity to transcend tradition (read: doxa) in its pursuit of a more faithful reproduction of the forms.

This approximation of the forms, of course, must be understood as more than representational. Though one approaches the forms in logos, this approach is more than a linguistic or epistemological concern. All language use, Socrates says, involves memory of the

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96 MacDowell suggests that Gorgias has in mind Aeschylus’ pun on the name “Helen” (Helenen) and the verb helein, (“to destroy”) (29).
forms, but despite the talk of standards and recollection, memory is more than a mental activity. It is an ethical concern. For, as when the disembodied soul experiences the final revelation of the forms, when the embodied soul remembers this vision, its character (ethos) is transformed. The soul’s move, through logos from many perceptions at hand to the singular vision of the forms, transforms the soul’s experience of the manifold of appearances in which it lives. In the immediate context, this is most clearly indicated when the movement of memory is represented by the soul’s actions. When the soul looks up to the forms, Socrates says, it simultaneously looks down upon the objects populating the sensible world. This does not amount to a wholesale abandonment of the sensible world. However, through memory, logos resitutates the soul within the world that it inhabits; and in doing so alters all of the relationships in which the erga and pathe that constitute the soul are lived out. What the soul desires, what it strives after—what the soul is—changes when its vision and desire are directed towards the forms.

This transformation, Socrates insists, returns the soul to what it once was. As it approaches the forms, the soul approximates itself. Its pursuit of “the nourishment proper to it” restores to the soul the motion proper to it. Here one can see how, despite the many anxieties the Phaedrus expresses about the possible taint that the word of another carries into the soul, logos comes to be understood as a purifying force. Insofar as logos reorients the soul’s desire and motion away from the plurality of perceptions in the present towards that which it had once seen (eidos)—and desired and strived after—logos purifies the self-motion of the soul. As Kathryn Morgan comments, “the stress on motion (in the myth) is programmatic, given that the essence of the soul and the source of its immortality in the Phaedrus is self-motion” (54).97 Indeed, what we see in the mythic description of the effect of logos, and later of kallos, is that Socrates makes sense of these experiences in terms of motion. Logos turns the soul, prompting it not only look up, but to move in a different direction. And it is in this change of motion that the practical implications of Socrates’ treatment of the soul as motion become apparent. When logos redirects the soul, it is described as changing the whole tenor of its life. When the soul regains its original posture and strives after its original object—the forms instead of their sensuous approximations—its desire bypasses all those detours into which it had been diverted.

Of course, not all logoi are the same. Some discourses carry out this task of returning the soul to its proper motion more or less perfectly. This is why, though all logoi involve memory, Socrates is still able suggest that some discourses, like the first two speeches, contaminate the soul while others, like his/Stesichorus’ palinode, purify it. This is also why Socrates is able to repeat Stesichorus’ palinode to purify himself, because the key quality of such a discourse is not its personal origin. What matters is that a discourse turns the soul towards the forms. It is this crucial turn towards the forms, “that place… [of which] none of our earthly poets have yet sung”(247c), that sets Socrates’ discourse apart from those that come before him.

This turn towards the forms is not only characteristic of Socrates’ discourse in the palinode, but it is also characteristic of that most Socratic of discourses, the dialectic. Socrates’ description of logos as memory is very closely mirrored at the end of the dialogue by his definition of dialectic as the art of making collections and divisions (265d-266b). “First we bring

97 Kathryn A. Morgan, “Inspiration, Recollection, and Mimesis in Plato’s Phaedrus,” in Ancient Models of Mind: Studies in Human & Divine Rationality. Eds. Nightingale, Andrea and David Sedley, Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 2010. 45-63. See also, John Sallis’ Being & Logos, which argues that, coming out of the definition of the soul as “self-motion,” the myth needs to be understood primarily as a vehicle for explicating “the movement proper to the soul” (140).
a dispersed plurality under a single form (eis mian... idean), seeing it all together... (then) we are enabled to divide into forms (to palin kat’ eide dunasthai diatemnein), following the objective articulation” (265d-e). Socrates does not explicitly mention memory in this context, but his description of bringing together “a dispersed plurality under a single form” clearly repeats his description of logos as gathering a plurality under a single, remembered form. This is reinforced by his choice of words (idean, form, what is seen), which recalls the all-important vision of being that guides such collections. Furthermore, though Socrates does not directly mention memory in this context, he still conjures the remembered, mythic scene in which the soul followed its god toward the final revelation of the forms. “Whenever I deem another man able to discern an objective unity and plurality (i.e., capable of dialectic),” Socrates says, “I follow ‘in his footsteps where he leadeth as a god’” (266b). Insofar as logos is capable of returning the soul to its position in the divine procession, of course, it situates the soul in just that place—in the footsteps of a god. Socrates’ description of how he reacts to the man who is capable of dialectic alludes to two poetic tales of homecoming. Though he takes the words, “I follow ‘in his footsteps... as a god,” from the Odyssey (5.193), he also clearly alludes to the palinode’s mythic procession, and thus portrays participating in dialectic as enacting a sort of homecoming as well. Indeed, placing the dialectician next the gods (266b), as the palinode does the philosopher (248d), Socrates implies not only that the practice of dialectic most perfectly realizes the potential of logos to understand diverse appearances in light of a single form but also that dialectic is what promises to restore the soul to its proper place and motion.

The palinode and the dialectic are both marked by orderly collections and divisions of phenomena. Socrates is sure to point this out in his analysis of the rhetorical features of the dialogue’s three speeches (265d-266b). More importantly, both discourses are also poised to intervene in the motion of the soul. Logos not only gathers diverse appearances under a single form, but it is also capable of gathering the soul, its erga and pathe, from the plurality of objects in which it is dispersed, in order to redirect it toward the forms. Any discourse should be understood as intervening in the soul’s motion in similar fashion, but they need not share the same end. Many discourses fail to rise above the realm of conflicting appearances. Lysias’ speech offers a case in point. Whereas Socrates’ discourse seeks to communicate an order that reflects the forms, Lysias’ discourse, which Socrates criticizes for its “haphazard” movement between topics (264b), is poised to communicate its disorderly impulses to the soul of its audience. Though Lysias’ discourse thematizes the “betterment” of the boy, the advantages that he claims for the affair with the non-lover—a better reputation, better acquaintances, and so on—represent an amalgamation of the conventionally recognized goods of pederasty. His discourse then not only lacks the order of Socrates’ palinode, but it would maintain the soul’s entanglement in many of the objects of doxa that Socrates looks down upon. Indeed, claiming for the non-lover many of conventional advantages ascribed to pederasty,98 what Lysias’ argument amounts to is that the affair with the non-lover is better able to integrate the boy into the community of men, setting him up for politics and business, than the affair with the lover. In short, the overall effect of Lysias’ discourse would be to integrate its addressee into “the busy doings of mankind,” which is precisely the opposite of the effect of Socrates’ discourse.

98 Treating the Symposium’s Pausanias as the voice of conventional Greek pederasty, Kenneth Dover glosses his statement that “it is creditable to grant any favour in any circumstances for the sake of becoming a better person” (185b) in the following way. “To translate from euphemism into plain English: acceptance of the teacher’s thrusting penis between his thighs or in his anus is the fee which the pupil pays for good teaching, or alternatively, a gift from a younger person to an older person whom he has come to love and admire” (91).
For Socrates, the proper lover and his beloved are not integrated into the polis by their love. They are exiled by it. By virtue of “mak(ing) right use of such means of remembrance”—which is to say logos and kallos—“(the philosopher) ever approaches to the full vision of the perfect mysteries” (249b). “(The philosophical lover) and he alone,” Socrates continues, “becomes truly perfect” (249b). The theme of betterment gets played out against an entirely different horizon in Socrates’ speech. Rather than being integrated into the polis, it is by virtue of this approach to the forms that the philosopher and his beloved withdraw from the community. Withdrawing from the varied appearances which he once desired, the philosopher “stand(s) aside from the busy doings of mankind, and drawing nigh to the divine, he is rebuked by the multitude as being out of his wits” (249c-d). It is worth noting that the effect that Socrates attributes to the philosopher’s use of logos not only runs directly contrary to the effect of Lysias’ erotic discourse in practical, political terms, but in doing so, it also reverses the “blasphemous” results of that speech. As Socrates formulated his need for a purifying discourse, he worried that “by sinning in the sight of God (I) win high renown from man” (242d). Here we see that by drawing near to the gods, mirroring their desire and motion, the philosophical lover wins human rebuke.

Here I can more fully explain why it seems necessary to displace Andrea Wilson Nightingale’s characterization of discourses as either “authentic” or “alien” with the characterization of them as “purifying” or “polluting.” As I suggested at the start of chapter three, part of the reason for using the latter terms is that they not only derive from the dialogues themselves, but that they keep us focused on the process that is taking place in them (as opposed to the end result). Now, I can add that this process is not only ethical, in that is about transforming the relationships that structure the motion that constitutes the soul, but also that the end towards which this process strives is more circumscribed than the term “authentic” suggests. In the next chapter, I will go into more detail about how philosophical discourse, as understood by Plato, situates its practitioner in a characteristic set of relationships, with respect to his body, the community, his beloved, and so on, but I think that this is already becoming apparent. The characterization of logos that emerges from the Phaedrus’ palinode, which makes discourse depend upon and strive toward a specific image of episteme (the forms), provides discourse with an end that is less open-ended than many Plato scholars, including Nightingale, suggest. While Nightingale acknowledges that for Plato, “authentic discourse can only be achieved by way of philosophical investigation… (which) must be grounded in the ongoing investigation of the Forms” (170), she does not address how this demand restricts the scope of acceptable discourses. In this respect, Nightingale’s comparison of the Socratic/Platonic search for “authentic” logoi to Bakhtin’s project of critically appraising “the authority of the other’s discourse” seems misleading (170).

Bakhtin not only lacks “a standard… of absolute truth,” as Nightingale recognizes (170), but the self-consistency of the forms—their perfect self-identity and lack of history—underwrites the dialectic’s explicit demand that we eliminate any contradiction or conflict from our discourse and desire. Socrates practice of producing his interlocutor as a witness against himself would not offer Bakhtinian grounds upon which one could dismiss such discourses. In fact, like Barthes, Bakhtin celebrates the ability of the novel—and consciousness—to entertain tensions. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin writes, “every thought… senses itself to be from the very beginning a rejoinder in an unfinalized dialogue. Such thought is not impelled toward a well-rounded, finalized, systematically monologic whole. It lives a tense life on the borders of
someone else’s thought.” The fundamental condition of being forever alongside other consciousnesses does not allow for the completion necessary to purge one’s thinking of contradictions, but that appears to be just what Socrates’ questions demand. Indeed, the *Phaedrus* figures the soul’s escape from this condition in its flight toward the forms, a flight in which it leaves men and their petty concerns behind.

[B] Kallos. Immediately after describing how *logos* nourishes and purifies the soul by recalling the forms (249c), Socrates ascribes the same power to beauty (250a). The convergence of the powers of *kallos* and *logos* is reinforced not only by the proximity of these passages, but also by the fact that Socrates describes the effect of both in the same terms. Beauty subjects the soul to the same transport as *logos*. Of course, in beautiful images, the power of transport manifests the same ambiguity as it does in *logos*. The appearance of beauty has the power to ensnare the lover and to bind him to itself, dragging him along wherever it goes. Socrates represents this danger by invoking the conventional image of the lover as a slave. The lover, Socrates says, “welcome(s) a slave’s estate and any couch… where (he) may be suffered to lie down close beside (his) darling” (252a). This danger is also figured in the image of the lover, who, “surrender(s) to pleasure… after the fashion of a four-footed beast.” It is also figured in the image of Socrates as an animal that is led around by dangling text of a speech in front of his face. However, beautiful images do not always overwhelm the soul in quite the same way. Like *logoi*, Socrates insists that the appearance of beauty is capable of turning the soul’s gaze from the phenomena of the present to the soul’s eidetic past. In this case, the soul is still overwhelmed, but in the presence of beauty it suffers a transport that returns it to its proper motion and desire:

> As soon as (the lover) beholds the beauty of this world (*hen otan tede tis horon kallos*), (he) is reminded of true beauty (*tou alethous*), and his wings begin to grow; then is he fain (*prothumoumenos*, desires ardently, exerts himself) to lift his wings and fly upward; yet he has not the power, but inasmuch as he *gazes upward* like a bird (*ornithos… blepon ano*), and *cares nothing for the world beneath* (*ton kato de amelon*), men charge that he is demented. (249e-250a, my emphasis)

As with his description of the cathartic quality of *logos*, Socrates suggests that the beauty of this world (beauty *here, tede… kallos*) is capable of purifying the soul’s self-motion by turning it towards the forms (true beauty, *tou alethous*). This is again figuratively embodied in the upward gaze of the birdlike lover. Indeed, Socrates goes further, invoking the regrowth of the soul’s wings, Socrates combines the tropes of integrity and motion. As the soul’s “form” is restored, it lifts its wings and presses them into the service of restoring its original upward flight. Thus, its wings and its upward gaze come to embody the original motion and desire of the soul.

As with *logos*, when images of beauty inspire the soul to lift its head and wings, and fly away, they change the soul’s relation to the world that surrounds it. In fact, the image of beauty, if used properly, changes the soul’s relation to itself. In its upward flight, the soul transcends its desire for “beauty here.” As when *logos* summons the soul to look beyond the plurality of appearances that otherwise keep it enthralled, when the soul is carried away by beauty, it is possible for it to fly beyond the world of *doxa* towards the form of beauty itself. When this happens, the appearance(s) of beauty, including the one that prompted the soul’s flight to begin with, recedes from the soul’s horizon of concern. It “cares nothing for the world below.”

Again, like *logos*, Socrates insists, this alienates the lover from his community. It is easy to see why: The lover no longer shares in his community’s concerns. His desire is no longer

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invested in the same objects. The result is that the lover is transfigured. He is manifestly different, and the community recognizes it. Responding to his alien appearance, men accuse the lover of being “demented,” of being possessed by “madness” (aitian... manikos diakeimenos). Socrates concedes this, but contends that they wrongly value his madness. Presupposing, as the first two speeches of the *Phaedrus*, that all madness is a bad, they “know not that he is possessed by a deity” (249d).

From these brief descriptions of the effect that *kallos* and *logos* have upon the soul of the lover, one gets a sense of how profoundly the lover’s experience of them shapes his world. The powers of beauty and of discourse converge not only in the violence that the soul experiences under their sway, but more fundamentally they converge in their power to recreate the world in which the lover lives. Changing his relationship with his community; changing his relation to his senses, to his body, to the appearance of beauty, changing his relation to his beloved – by altering the relationships through which the lover moves, *kallos* and *logos* recreate the lover himself.

To experience beauty in this way—to be possessed by a deity—is not simply to be infused with a “new,” divine element, it is to recover one’s lost home (the mythic procession) and one’s lost self. And so, it is to live one’s life in a different world, as a changed man. What is the character of this life and this world? How are the souls of the lover and his beloved transformed by this experience? To what end does this transformation strive? These questions are best answered by taking a closer look at the privileged episode of desire, the erotic encounter. The next chapter turns towards Socrates’ description of philosophical eroticism, both in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Symposium*, in order to characterize the lover’s relationship with his beloved while also asking how this relationship transforms the rest of its participants’ lives. In short, the question that my final chapter poses is the same one that Socrates poses in the *Protagoras*. To those who would seek out Plato’s exemplary lover, one must to ask: “Now whom do you think you are going to, and what will he make of you?”

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100 As we have seen, *logos* and *kallos* both break in on the soul from without. Both are described as being capable of “carrying away” the soul (*numpholepto, harpazo*), as subjecting the soul to violence—“striking” it (*ekplagei*), “throwing” it (*proubales*), as twisting (*strophe*) and turning it (*tropo*). Both are capable of “possessing” (*enthousiaso*), of “enslaving” (230d, 250e, 252a) and of “charming” or “drugging” the soul (*katapharmakeuthentos*). Of course, it is this same, threatening power that makes *logos* and *kallos* both capable of purifying the soul—of turning it towards the forms and returning it to its original motion.
Chapter Five: The Subject of Philosophical Eroticism
Introduction: The Transformative Nature of Philosophical Eroticism

While many scholars recognize that Plato depicts philosophical eroticism as a transformative experience, few set this project in its proper context. That is to say, few note that this transformation is treated as a sort of purification. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates’ depiction of philosophical eroticism is not only occasioned by his desire to purify himself of his blasphemous first speech, but his palinode articulates what such “purity” entails and sets that as the ethical end towards which philosophical eroticism strives. The *Symposium* handles the issue of purity differently, but it remains important in that text as well. Unfortunately, this concern is not given its proper place in current scholarship about philosophical eroticism.

In *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers*, for example, Marina McCoy underscores how philosophical eroticism transforms the beloved. “All lovers treat others in imitation of the god that they had previously followed and ‘sculpt’ their beloveds in accordance with this ideal” (178), McCoy says, paraphrasing Socrates’ description of the lover’s approach to his beloved (*Phaedrus* 252c-d). Thus, she stresses, the practice of philosophical eroticism aims at an ethical end, which, through dialogue, is actualized in the ethos or character of the beloved. Taking Socrates and Phaedrus’ interaction as an example of this practice, McCoy insists that “(p)art of the ‘content’ of the speech is its effect on Phaedrus – that is… how it affects who he will become as a human being” (185). McCoy does well to stress the transformative power of philosophical eroticism, but she neglects to situate this transformation in the context of Socrates’ concern for purity. Nevertheless, as this work has endeavored to show, purification is a consistent concern of the Platonic dialogues, which philosophical eroticism aims to address.

The problem with treating the issue of eroticism separately from the concern with purity is that Plato’s readers are tempted to overstate the open-endedness of the erotic transformation. It is a virtue of McCoy’s work that it is cognizant that the end of this transformation is circumscribed. She recognizes that the desire for the forms that philosophical eroticism cultivates shapes who its participants become, but she understates the extent to which this determines the character of the erotic pair. “This love of the forms has consequences for the philosopher’s character,” McCoy writes. “Plato closely connects moral virtues such as wisdom, courage, openness to criticism, and self-knowledge to the love of a transcendent good outside of oneself…. In this sense, the philosopher’s theoretical stance ought to be understood in terms of the more primary meaning of the Greek term *theoria* as a kind of vision of the world and oneself in relation to that world” (6). I wholeheartedly agree, philosophical eroticism turns on the vision of the forms, and it needs to be understood in terms of how this vision situates the soul.

However, while I appreciate McCoy’s willingness to recognize that the epistemological horizon

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of philosophy as Plato conceives it, fosters a certain type of character, this chapter argues that more can be said to describe this character and its place in the world.

Moreover, there is more room to be critical of the claims that are made on behalf of philosophical eroticism. McCoy hesitates to delineate the character of the philosopher beyond the encomium given above. In part, this is because she reads Plato’s acknowledgement of the philosopher’s incomplete grasp of the forms as indicating how open-ended the philosophical project is. Plato’s characterization of the philosopher’s grasp on the forms as incomplete is construed as a warning against dogmatism. There is some truth to this position, but while Plato’s dialogues shy away from making grand pronouncements of what is true, they nevertheless insist that truth has certain qualities (for instance, that it is unchanging and not sensuous). If this vision of the truth shapes who the subject of philosophical eroticism will become, then what more can be said about how the character of the forms informs the character of those who desire them?102

Others are less reserved in the openness that they ascribe to this project of erotic transformation. In “Eros & Education: Plato’s Transformative Epistemology,” John Russon agrees that the epistemological issues raised by philosophical eroticism have ethical consequences. Indeed, Russon equates the epistemological and the ethical, “This, then, is an epistemology or transformation, for an advance in knowledge is inseparable from a fundamental change in behaviour that essentially embodies that knowledge” (123). This far I agree with Russon’s reading of Plato, but he seems to discern a pluralism and willingness to admit multiple perspectives that are foreign to Plato. “Ethics and epistemology in human life are geared (necessarily) towards the soul’s coming to recognize its implicit commitments,” Russon says, “Eros is the demand that we be true to our own natures through being open to the education that will lead us to behave responsibly” (124, my emphasis).104 Though he focuses on Diotima’s speech in the Symposium, Russon’s analysis is relevant to philosophical eros in the Phaedrus as well.

As we will see, there is some sense in which Socrates’ depiction of philosophical eroticism can be described as being geared at cultivating one’s “implicit commitments” and hence at getting its participants “to be true to (their) own natures.” However, it is important to add two caveats: (1) First, the text depicts the natures of both lovers as being the same. Of course, the lover and his beloved are empirically different, but they are described as sharing the

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102 I should also note that I am critical of McCoy’s acquiescence to Plato’s contention that a “transcendent good”—one that is not only outside of oneself, but also outside of history and society—is necessary in order to open the subject to self-criticism (191). This contention is frequently taken for granted in Plato scholarship. John Sallis seems to be getting at the same point when he writes that speech, “(must be) subordinated to a higher measure, a final measure that most fundamentally determines the perfection of speech,” which implies that without recourse “the manifestness of the beings, that is, truth” (174), there can be no critique—either of the individual himself or of a culture. For a similar position, see Gonzalez 2000, 123.

103 Russon, John. “Eros & Education: Plato’s Transformative Epistemology,” Laval Theologique et Philosophique, 56.1 (2000): 113-125. Halperin also describes “the radically transformative power of eros” (1985 182). Arguing that “the lover’s desire aims… at a liberation and release of his own creative energies” or at “realizin(g) an objective potential in the self” (182), Halperin takes a position very similar to Russon’s description of eros as demanding that “we be true to our own natures” (124).

104 There is a distinct irony in describing philosophical eroticism as demanding that the individual become “responsible” for his implicit commitments, for its spokesman, Socrates, consistently disavows responsibility for his own discourse: in the Symposium, he denies responsibility for refuting Agathon, saying, “No, no, dear Agathon. It’s the truth you find unanswerable, not Socrates” (201c); in the Gorgias, he tells Callicles, “Do not be astonished at my speaking thus, but stop my favorite, philosophy, from saying what she does” (482a-b); and in the Phaedrus, various attributions of his speech to others (Sappho et al) act as disavowals.
same nature, which philosophical eroticism seeks to recover. Thus, their erotic practice is described as being premised on sameness and as eliminating difference as it works to restore both participants to their previous, “purer” selves. (2) More important, the object of their love, which determines their nature, is not the other in any recognizably social sense as Russon seems to indicate. The ultimate objects of desire, in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* alike, are the forms, and these are expressly removed from the social sphere. Indeed, this is why the identities of the lovers converge, because who they are is determined by an identical desire for the same object. Russon pursues a reading of Plato’s erotics that is analogous to the reading of Plato’s rhetoric that Sallis flirts with when he describes the speaking subject as “taking up” previously accomplished, anonymous collections (151). However, as Sallis seems to recognize, Plato grounds these collections and our valuation of them—that is, the desire they express—not in history or culture, but in the forms, which are placed explicitly outside of these realms.

Russon elaborates a reading of Plato that traces our values and desires to alien origins, but he suppresses the metaphysical quality of this origin. His treatment of philosophical eroticism focuses on the path of Diotima’s lover, whose initial desire for a beautiful body gives way to a desire for the beauty of all bodies, beautiful souls, laws and customs, and eventually Beauty itself. His crucial interpretative move is to suggest that the initial desire for a body is more properly understood as a desire for the soul that animates that body. “This is precisely what it means to recognize the other as a soul and not a body, that is, to want a soul is to want something that has a will, that makes decisions, and the desire to be with such an other… is the desire to have the other choose you… the desire to have yourself live up to what the other wants” (118). The theme song for Plato’s erotics, Russon seems to suggest, is Cheap Trick’s famously Lacanian anthem, “I Want You to Want Me.” Accordingly, like Halperin, he insists that Platonic *Eros* is based on an essential mutuality of desire. This becomes the basis, he argues, for understanding the soul’s ascension up Diotima’s “ladder of love.” The soul’s desire to be desired, its desire to instantiate what the other values, explains how the desire for beautiful bodies can be transmuted into a desire for beautiful souls, customs and knowledge. “The reasons that make us responsible to one soul, then, make us responsible for the well-being of all souls… and for that reason the next move up the ladder is the *eros* for laws and customs, that is, the commitment to the ways in which many souls in community represent their interests and upon which they depend for well-being” (118). Russon’s reading, however, breaks down at the pinnacle of philosophical eroticism, for unlike the beloved’s assent or the laws of the *polis*, the forms themselves are neither intentional nor expressive. Desire emanates from the laws just as it emanates from the beloved, but it does not emanate from the forms. As Halperin points out in “Plato & Erotic Reciprocity,” the forms do not desire and cannot return the lover’s desire (72, fn. 33); so at the origin and end of Platonic *Eros*, the essential reciprocity upon which Russon’s account rests, breaks down.

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105 See discussion in Chapter Four.

106 It should be noted that Russon’s reading excludes as objects of erotic desire anything that is beautiful, but non-human. It is not clear that he could account for Diotima’s mention of “gold or clothing” alongside “beautiful boys” as the possible objects of erotic attachment (211d). Russon’s reading is thought provoking, but one runs into fewer interpretive difficulties if one understands Diotima’s mysteries as being populated by objects whose value depends upon a transcendent form of beauty as opposed to the desires of others. For a reading that is nearly the polar opposite of Russon’s, see Gregory Vlastos’ “Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” *Platonic Studies, 2nd Ed.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 1981. 3-42. According to Vlastos, Plato’s major failing is to think of love of people as “love for objectifications of excellence,” which he says, “is to fail to make the thought of them as subjects central to what is felt for them in love” (32). I will return to both Vlastos and Russon below.
Russon does not have much to say about the forms or about the content of the philosophical pair’s “implicit commitment.” Indeed, he does not explicitly acknowledge that their commitments are characterized as necessarily converging on the same object. As a result, his treatment of erotic transformation seems quite open-ended. However, the desire for the forms must be what he refers to as the erotic pair’s “implicit commitment,” for in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus* the forms name the ultimate objects of desire. The forms, both dialogues insist, are what one wants even when one does not know it. Russon neglects this, but if we keep the place of the forms in mind, his depiction of philosophical eroticism as “attend(ing) to the commitments implicit in one’s words and deeds in order to let oneself be told who one is” begins to sound rather more dogmatic (122). The “demand that we be true to ourselves” is less open-ended than it might seem, if philosophical eroticism assumes that everyone’s desire is the same.

There is something lost this celebration of “becoming ourselves.” Because Russon neglects to account for the role that the forms play in this practice of eroticism, he fails to recognize this demand as problematic. On the one hand, he gives no indication that when we become ourselves, the self that we become ought to be the same as the self that the other becomes. That is to say, like McCoy, Russon does not indicate how circumscribed the erotic transformation is. On the other hand, also like many Plato scholars, Russon assumes that the process whereby “our implicit commitments”—our true desires, our true selves—are uncovered and enforced to be unproblematic. This assumption elides the power dynamic that is at work when the lover is set up as the interpreter of the beloved’s desire, who presents the beloved with an image of himself and demands that he recognize himself therein and act accordingly. However, if this process of interpretation is the dialectic, chapter one of the present work has shown that to be a thoroughly hierarchical and power-laden practice.

In this chapter, I challenge characterizations of philosophical eroticism such as McCoy’s and Russon’s. I argue not only that philosophical eroticism assumes a more determinate ethical end than is commonly suggested, but that this end is the same for the lover and beloved. Platonic love is premised on an initial sameness or identity of the erotic pair, and it aims to eradicate any lingering differences between its participants. This is why it is important to acknowledge that philosophical eroticism is described as “purifying.” The *Phaedrus* posits a “purier,” mythic identity as the origin of the erotic pair’s attraction as well as end toward which they strive.

Because the lover is charged with the task of bringing this transformation about, in himself and his beloved, I also argue that the practice by which those ends are produced are more problematic and power-laden than is generally acknowledged. On this last point, I also dispute Halperin’s influential characterization of philosophical eroticism as non-hierarchical. To this end, I examine the relationship that philosophical eroticism prescribes, paying special attention to how Socrates distinguishes between its participants’ respective roles and marks lingering hierarchies. In particular, I want to ask: What form does their love take? How is it expressed (in what behaviors, for instance), and how does this relationship transform the character of its participants? In part, this means that it will be important to articulate the telos or end of philosophical eroticism (what is its goal?), but it will also be important to examine the experience of both participants as they strive towards those ends. After all, just because both participants share the same goal does not mean that they share the same experience getting there.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, it provides a quick overview of the ends of philosophical eroticism, which, include the epistemic end of experiencing the forms (the vision of beauty itself) and the ethical end of becoming a likeness of one’s god. The first portion of this chapter tries to show, in particular, how these ends are related to one another. The second part
focuses on the encounter between the philosophical lover and his beloved and attempts to discern the roles each plays in their relationship. In particular, it follows the *Phaedrus* account of how the lover “selects” his beloved and then “leads” him through the transformative process. This portion of the chapter is critical of philosophical eroticism and of Plato scholarship on two points. The first point is that the role played by difference or otherness in the erotic relationship, on Plato’s account is quite minimal, and it has been overblown by Plato scholars. According to the *Phaedrus*, the sameness of the lover and his beloved, their shared mythic identity, is not only the basis of erotic attraction, but that identity is also the end towards which it strives. The second critical thrust of this portion of the chapter concerns the issue of power. By paying attention to how the roles of the erotic pair are differentiated, I show how, even as the relationship strives to diminish the difference between its participants, an initial hierarchy structures the entire relationship. The gist of my argument is that philosophical eroticism sets the lover up as the interpreter of his and his beloved’s desire; and this act of interpretation puts him in a position of authority over the beloved, as he seeks to shape the latter’s self-understanding and identity.

The third part of this chapter then attempts to supplement current scholarship on philosophical eroticism by fleshing out the *ethos* produced by it. It does so by describing the sort of understanding and attitude that this practice cultivates in its participants with respect to their senses, their bodies, their communities and each other. My treatment of Platonic love in this portion is rather conventional, for I argue that the orientation towards the forms that the erotic relationship cultivates involves a distinct devaluation of the individual’s embodied experience. Still, it is worth revisiting these issues, for to the extent that I can show that philosophical eroticism situates the couple in a characteristic set of relationships, I can show that the transformation that this practice aims at is not as open-ended as is commonly thought. Moreover, by visiting these issues, I also hope to show that the dialectic (and the epistemological assumptions it imposes) works in support of this project. That is, the dialectic works to interpret the couple’s desire (the beloved’s, in particular) in such a way as to habituate them to a characteristic set of relationships.

I. Origins & Ends: The Path of Platonic Love

“Where do you come from, Phaedrus my friend, and where are you going?”

(*Phaedrus* 227a, *Ho phile Phaidre, poi kai pothen,* )

It has frequently been noted that the opening line of the *Phaedrus* not only anticipates Phaedrus and Socrates’ journey outside of the city, but that it should be understood in relation to the action of the soul in the palinode’s myth. “Where do you come from, Phaedrus my friend, and where are you going?” This question, John Sallis suggests, “can be understood as a question about the whither and whence of the human soul, that is a question about the origin and the end that define the destiny (*moira*) of the human soul and thereby give the soul its proper limits” (108). The importance of this opening question is underscored by the fact that Socrates defines rhetoric as an art of *psychagogia*, an art of leading the soul (261a), so this question is fundamental to the issue of developing a philosophical rhetoric and erotics. In each case, it is a question of the soul’s motion. The importance of the question is also stressed by the fact that Socrates’ final words, “let us be going” (279a), return to the issue of motion, indicating its

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107 McCoy makes a similar point. “The *Phaedrus* as a whole can be understood as a form of erotic discourse, leading the soul toward philosophical inquiry into the nature of love, the self, and the forms. In this sense, Socrates’ first words of the dialogue – “My dear Phaedrus, where have you been and where are you going?” – are words for Plato’s audience as well” (McCoy 185).

continued relevance as the dialogue ends. The opening and conclusion of the dialogue together indicate that Socrates has been engaged in just the sort of psychagogic intervention into the motion of Phaedrus’ soul that he defines as the province of the arts of rhetoric and erotics.

In the beginning as in the end, then, the Phaedrus raises the issue of motion. Indeed, it poses the question of motion in terms of beginnings and ends. As Sallis points out, the “whence and whither” (poi kai pothen) of Socrates’ opening question asks us to think of the origin and end of the soul’s motion in relation to each other; and the myth suggests that the answer to both questions is the same—the heavenly procession, the realm of the forms, that is the origin and end of the soul’s motion. Socrates’ answer to the question of origins is normative, and it determines the end towards which soul should strive. Thus, when the dialogue ends, it is no longer a question of “where to go.” Socrates’ account of the soul’s origins, as Sallis puts it, “give(s) the soul its proper limits”; so, by the end of the dialogue, the question is displaced by an exhortation: let us be going (for now we know where).

The First End of Philosophical Eroticism: Experiencing the Forms

Philosophical eroticism, which Socrates’ relationship with Phaedrus exemplifies, pursues two ends, one of which might be called “epistemological,” the other, “ethical.” The first end toward which it strives is the forms. Socrates describes the forms as desire’s original object and ultimate end. The forms stand behind any event in the individual’s erotic life. The Phaedrus and the Symposium both treat “beauty itself” as the “true object” that the soul pursues when it strives towards the proximate object that occupies it at any given moment (e.g., the beloved).

Socrates suggests that one cannot wholly possess the forms as one would a typical object of the appetites. Though the forms are said to nourish the soul, one does not devour them as a hungry man does food. This is because one’s relation to them always stands at a remove. The embodied soul can only recollect the forms as they were revealed before its birth. They are never fully present. Even in the mythic procession they stand at a distance. What the lover seeks when he seeks the forms is not possession or consumption of some object,109 most certainly not the possession of a sensuous object, like a body. What the soul seeks is a knowledge or experience of that otherworldly vision that it once shared in. In the Phaedrus, this is described as a divine revelation that fills the soul with joy, and it is portrayed as the soul’s return to its place of origin.

There is little doubt that Diotima’s account of erotic experience in the Symposium shares the Phaedrus’ conception of this vision as the ultimate end of philosophical eroticism. Her account lacks the story of the soul’s life prior to its embodied existence, so its progress in the mysteries is not described as “recollection” or “return.” However, she describes erotic experience as an epistemic journey which, like the Phaedrus’ ascent, culminates in “knowledge of beauty” (210d, epistemen..., he esti kalou). Moreover, beauty itself (auto to kalon), the object of this knowledge shares the same qualities that Socrates attributes to the vision of the forms in the Phaedrus. In terms that closely approximate the Phaedrus’ description of the forms, Diotima describes Beauty as something that “always is” (aei on), meaning it is exempt from becoming, “(it) neither comes nor passes away” (211a, outhe gignonomenon outhe apollumenon). As in the Phaedrus, Diotima also stresses its simplicity, purity, completeness and self-identity. “(It is) itself by itself with itself... always in one form” (211b, auto kath’ auto meth’ autou moneides aei

109 According to Halperin, “Diotima’s refusal to call eros a desire for the beautiful tout court is to avoid the otherwise inescapable implication that erotic desire aims at the possession of beautiful things” (1985 177). That is, Diotima’s insistence that eros strives to give birth in the beautiful, distinguishes its telos from the object that arouses it.
The repetition of *autos* is particularly noteworthy, because it repeatedly asserts the identity of “Beauty itself,” marking its sameness in time and its independence from the fleeting appearances—what the *Phaedrus* calls “likenesses”—with which it might otherwise be confused. The identity and independence of beauty (and the threat of confusion that emanates from its appearances) are again asserted when Diotima distinguishes “Beauty itself, absolute, pure (and) unmixed” (*auto to kalon... heilikrines, katharon, ameikton*) from “human flesh or colors or other great nonsense of mortality,” which “pollutes” its earthly instantiations (211e, *anapleon*).110

In epistemological terms, this experience can be described as “purifying,” because this non-sensuous vision separates “beauty itself” out from the other “stuff” that “pollutes” it. This vision distinguishes “beauty itself” (*auto to kalon*) from colors, shapes, tactile qualities, and the “other great”—sensuous—“nonsense” in which it appears. So, in strictly epistemological terms, the vision is purifying, because it produces a “purified” understanding of what beauty is. This may seem quite far removed from the ethical concern with the purity of the soul that is evoked when Socrates describes the disembodied soul as being “without taint (of the body),” “whole and unblemished,” “untouched by the evils that awaited us in the days to come” (*Phaedrus* 250b-c). With its focus on this epistemological vision, the *Symposium* might not seem concerned with the same sort of purity that worries the *Phaedrus*. However, these concerns are closer than they appear. After all, in the *Phaedrus* the purity of “whole and unblemished” soul is maintained by its vision of the “whole and unblemished” forms. The epistemic and the ethical concerns with purity seem to express different aspects of the same problem. The knowledge that philosophical eroticism pursues produces a particular type of subject, *episteme* cultivates a particular *ethos*. It is no surprise, then, that in both dialogues the changing vision of the philosophical lover, as he turns from “beauty’s likeness” to “beauty itself” transforms who he is and how he experiences the world.

**Dialectic, Desire & the Image of Episteme.** This image of beauty as intelligible, non-sensuous, unchanging, self-identical and “pure,” we will see below, circumscribes the outcome of Socrates’ dialectical investigations; for the qualities ascribed to beauty are ascribed to any object of knowledge, whether it is justice, temperance, and even knowledge itself (*Phaedrus* 247d). Indeed, as we saw last chapter, these qualities are what distinguish *episteme* from *doxa*, the form from its instantiations. This vision of *episteme* underwrites the practice of *dialectic*. In order to be recognized as legitimate, the answer to Socrates’ questions will have to conform to the image of *episteme* that the forms provide. G.B. Kerferd makes a similar argument when he suggests that the forms distinguish Plato’s dialectic from sophistic anitilogic. “The only fundamental point on which Plato is going to take issue with (the sophists) is their failure to understand that the flux of phenomena is not the end of the story – one must look elsewhere for the truth which is the object of true knowledge, and even for the understanding of the flux and its causes we have to go to more permanent, secure and reliable entities, the famous Platonic Forms” (Kerferd 67).

The difficulty that one runs into in the Platonic text is that it is unclear just how Socrates establishes the necessity of referring *eros* to an ultimate object of this sort. In the *Phaedrus*, the forms are only introduced once Socrates has begun his mythic-analogical discourse, describing the soul in terms of “likenesses,” and then he simply posits them as what the soul naturally strives towards. He does not arrive at them by argument. Moreover, as we saw in chapter three, Socrates himself leaves us with questions about the status of this discourse. Diotima’s discourse

110 Nehamas and Woodruff’s translation preferred.
occupies a similar position. Her description of the vision of beauty itself is wrapped in the language of the mysteries and handed down from a distant authority.  

Marina McCoy makes an observation about the status of the forms in philosophical eroticism that helps illuminate this difficulty. She suggests that the role that the forms play in philosophical eroticism is grounded in Socrates’ desire rather than his knowledge. “Socrates has a vision of the world in which he is turned toward the forms. However, this theoretical stance is grounded upon the philosopher’s desire. That is, Plato does not suggest that the philosopher knows the forms,” but instead that he knows his desire (McCoy 118). This is why McCoy sees philosophical eroticism as fundamentally open-ended. As McCoy points out, “Socrates expresses a considerable amount of skepticism as to whether anyone can know the good adequately” (118). There is a certain amount of openness that follows from the difficulty of knowing the forms, but what McCoy does not recognize is the limits of that openness.

Though the scenes in which the forms are introduced provide reason to be skeptical of even their existence, Socrates’ manner of conducting dialectical investigations brooks no doubt that knowledge should conform to the image that they provide. Socrates’ famous “what is x?” question and his “brevity rule,” which habitually exclude considerations of context and perspective, aims to produce responses that conform to the image of knowledge provided by the forms. When Diotima insists that beauty be separated from “color or human flesh,” from “(what is) beautiful at one time and ugly at another,” from “the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body” (211a), it should be clear that considerations such as these will be excluded from any attempt to define beauty. This clearly restricts the realm of possible answers to the question of “What is beauty?” Thus, philosophical eroticism not only aims at a specific epistemological end, but it puts significant constraints on what counts as episteme; and this determines the parameters of the main activity, dialogue, that the erotic pair undertakes. If McCoy is right (and I think she is), then Socrates imposes all of these restrictions based upon his understanding of his own desire—not on his knowledge of beauty, justice or knowledge or so on.

Taking McCoy’s insight in a different direction, one might say, “Okay, Socrates has a vision of the world that is organized around the forms, and this is grounded in his desire, not his knowledge. The question then, is why should Socrates’ desire become a regulative ideal for everyone else?” Why should McCoy consider the sophists “incomplete” philosophers because they lack Socrates’ desire that knowledge conform to the image he demands? The reason is that Socrates’ understanding of his desire, though it appears not to be grounded in the sort of episteme that he imagines, is treated as if it were. Socrates’ understanding of his own desire becomes the basis of universal claims about the truth of desire and of knowledge. I will discuss the dialectic’s relation to desire further below, but I also want to note the second end that philosophical eroticism sets for itself.

111 In this respect, Plato’s treatment of Being resembles Parmenides’. Like the narrator of Parmenides’ On Nature, whose distinction between “truth” (aletheia) and “the way of doxa” he repeats, Socrates also attributes his knowledge of truth (aletheia) to an authoritative, wise woman (DK 28 B1 28-30, B2 4-8, Symp 201c). Mi-Kyoung Lee describes Parmenides’ attribution of his speech to the goddess as allowing him to claim the special kind of knowledge that is only available to initiates. Socrates does the same thing in the Symposium, invoking the language of the mysteries to support his claim. Though, perhaps this should be described as happening at one remove, given that Diotima is a prophetess rather than a goddess. Lee, Mi-Kyoung. Epistemology After Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, & Democritus. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. 39. Though it does not involve religious authority, Irigaray discerns a similar epistemological imposition in the “Allegory of the Cave.” She refers to it as an “authoritarian pedagogy,” which imposes “discrete and neatly delineated categories and dichotomies” upon the prisoner’s world of experience (271).
The Second End of Philosophical Eroticism: Becoming-God

While the forms name the ultimate end of the soul’s desire, the *Phaedrus* attributes to philosophical eroticism a second, closely connected end. The ethical end of “becoming godlike” arises directly out of the epistemological project of pursuing the forms.\(^{112}\) The god, whom the soul followed in the heavenly procession, provides an image of a more perfect pursuit of the forms. As such, it provides an ethical standard against which to measure the progress of the individual soul. It is important to note that the activity modeled by the god organizes the whole world around the forms; so, as the soul becomes a likeness of its god, all of the relationships in which it finds itself will be changed. The question of what becoming “godlike” means then ultimately prompts us to consider how the soul’s orientation towards the forms situates it differently with respect to its body, senses, beloved, and community.

The gods are themselves subordinate to the forms. Like human souls, the gods strive after the forms in order to “feast upon” them (*Phaedrus* 247a-b), but unlike human souls, their proximity to the forms renders them divine (249c). It has long been observed that the dependence of the gods upon the forms represents a major theological and cosmological innovation, for in making the gods subordinate to abstract principles, Plato limits their power to determine the character and value of the world.\(^{113}\) The consequences of this are far reaching, but what is of concern here are its erotic and ethical implications.

In the *Phaedrus*, the claim that the gods are divine by virtue of their proximity to the forms is initially made in Socrates’ discussion of the philosophical response to beauty. Describing how beauty’s appearance reminds him of the form, Socrates says, “the soul of the philosopher alone… recover(s) her wings, for she (the soul), so far as may be is ever near in memory to those things (the forms) a god’s nearness whereunto makes him truly a god” (249c). Kathryn Morgan suggests that this claim changes the meaning of “inspiration” (*enthusiasmos*) as the text uses it. Morgan contends that Plato initially exaggerates the cultural interpretation of *enthusiasmos* when he represents it as a form of “divine intervention into the mortal world” (50). In the case of poetry, for instance, Morgan says that Socrates represents “the god (as being) in the poet… (so) the poet is not responsible” (49). The same holds true for prophecy and *telestic* madness, she says, summarizing Socrates’ description of the lesser forms of divine madness.

Morgan argues that Plato’s contemporaries were more able to reconcile individual responsibility

\(^{112}\) Though it is taken up in a variety of terms, there seems to be some consensus building in recent Plato scholarship that the epistemological is closely connected to the ethical. Gonzalez 113-154; Russon 113-125; McCoy 2008; Nightingale, Andrea Wilson. “Plato on aporia and self-knowledge.” Ancient Models of Mind. Eds. David Sedley and Andrea Wilson Nightingale. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 8-26; Morgan 45-63. These and many others have recently underscored the proximity of the epistemological and ethical concerns in Plato’s dialogues.

\(^{113}\) Sallis observes that this subordination places the gods in such a way that they cannot act as the origin of values. He suggests that this extends the argument of the *Euthyphro* that piety is not determined by the changing whims of the gods, as if by changing their minds the gods could change what piety consists of. Piety is not doing “what is pleasing to the gods” simply because it is pleasing to them (*Euthyphro* 10a). Rather, it involves “man’s subordinating himself in an appropriate way to that to which the gods are themselves subordinated as a condition of their being gods” (Sallis 174). Debra Nails makes a similar point, “Plato’s opposition to traditional Greek religion is grounded in the claim that what is divine must be good, ruling out arbitrary and contradictory behavior by the gods…. Even the “good gods” that remain are never in the dialogues represented as the sorts of authorities from which one can hope to gain knowledge or power or honor” (2). Nails, Debra. “Plato’s Antipaideia: Perplexity for the Guided.” Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Boston, MA. 10-15 August 1998. See also: Grube, G. M. Plato’s Thought. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980. 152-3. For a discussion of the historical reception of this point see Guthrie, W. K. C. A History of Greek Philosophy, v. 4: Plato: The Man and His Dialogues, Earlier Period. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975. 109-111.
and the experience of inspiration than Socrates says. However, she argues, that the point of this exaggerated interpretation of *enthusiasmos* is not to provide a historically accurate depiction of how the Greeks understood it, but to provide a foil against which to understand philosophical inspiration. Pointing out that the treatment of the first three forms of divine madness are separated from the treatment of erotic madness by Socrates’ sketch of the heavenly procession, Morgan argues that the intervening cosmological sketch changes the meaning of *enthusiasmos*. The “inspired” lover is no longer, she argues, the site of a god’s intervention. “Rather than being invaded by an outside force, the mind of the philosopher leaves the mortal world. The process of recollection allows him to use his memory to come as close as he can to the Forms that inhabit the place beyond the heavens” (Morgan 54). Rather than being entered by the divine, she argues, in its upward flight the soul actually enters the divine. This greatly diminishes the importance of the gods, for not only does the god not actively intervene into the human world but the soul’s divinity is not attributable to the presence of the god, but to the presence of the forms.

Morgan overstates the change in the meaning of “inspiration” a bit. For Socrates is far from abandoning his depiction of the lover as overrun by various, powerful forces (influxes of beauty, *logoi*, and desire); and insofar as this remains the case, we have to understand the soul as existing in a vulnerable and compromised state. The anxiety that attends this situation is what the *Phaedrus*, and much of Plato’s work, responds to. Morgan risks doing too much to insulate the lover and beloved from the world around them, and we should be cognizant of how they continue to act upon and be acted upon by external forces.

That said, Morgan makes a good point. Since the gods are divine by virtue of their proximity to the forms, the human soul becomes divine to the extent that it approaches the forms as well. Moreover, she smartly observes, this cosmological schema reconciles Plato’s descriptions of inspiration, recollection and mimesis, showing that each names different aspects of the same psychic activity. In reconciling recollection and *mimesis*, in particular, Morgan shows how closely connected the epistemic and ethical ends of philosophical eroticism are. When the philosophical soul sees instantiations of beauty in the phenomenal world and remembers its past vision of “beauty itself,” it begins, once again, to pursue that form in memory. When the soul pursues the forms in memory (recollection), it can simultaneously be described as “inspired” in the sense sketched above, because it approaches the divine. In short, recollection (*anamnesis*) is *enthusiasmos*. At the same time, this act can be described as a species of *mimesis*, for the soul not only becomes divine in the presence of the forms (as Morgan notes), but its pursuit of the forms duplicates the action of the gods. In its pursuit of the forms the human soul comes to instantiate the *erga* and *pathe* of the divine soul. It suffers influxes of beauty and *logoi*, and if these return the soul to its vision of the forms, it is nourished. Perhaps better, one should say that these passions, which our souls share with the divine, bring us to resemble the gods because they goad us to the action, the pursuit of the forms, proper to both.

This duplication of the divine soul’s pursuit of the forms brings a normative dimension to Plato’s erotic theory. The gods provide an image of a purer and more perfect pursuit of the forms; and as such, they provide an ethical standard against which to measure the progress of the individual soul. The status of this standard is unique in the *Phaedrus*. For unlike “beauty itself,” “justice itself,” and the “other prized possessions” that the soul strives after (*Phaedrus* 250a), the soul does not have a “form” against which it can be measured. There is no *Being*, no “soul itself,” no unchanging form of the soul that sits motionless outside of the heavens. Indeed, if Plato were to posit a form for the soul, he would be faced with a choice of either attributing motion to it, which would make it unlike any other form, or of characterizing it as motionless,
which would make it like the other forms but would rob it of the definitive quality of the soul (i.e., self-motion). Moreover, as chapter three showed, the soul, understood as self-motion, which is neither separate from nor reducible to its \textit{erga} and \textit{pathe}, always exists in relation to other things from which it cannot be extricated without changing its nature. This makes the soul, whether human or divine, fundamentally different from the forms; for while the soul is essentially entangled in its world, the forms are perfectly self-sufficient and independent of everything else, including their instantiations. Diotima notes, for instance, that “beauty itself “does not become smaller or greater nor suffer any change” when beautiful things “come to be or pass away” (\textit{Symp} 211b). One cannot, then make the assumption that Richard Bett does, when he says that “at every stage Plato would have held that the soul is a ‘thing which is’” (21), for the soul appears to have a nature that is quite different from those things which are called “Beings.”

Nevertheless, even while indicating the lack of an ontologically grounded standard for the soul, the \textit{Phaedrus} uses the image of the gods to fill this gap. By mythically situating the mortal soul behind the gods and depicting it as undertaking the same pursuit as them—striving after the same, nourishing vision—Plato uses the gods to figure what the soul ought to become. That is to say, the gods are characterized in such a way as to become a sort of “form” which the human soul should be made to conform to. The gods’ normative role becomes particularly apparent in Socrates’ description of the philosophical lover’s activities.

\textbf{II. The Power Dynamic of Philosophical Eros: Differentiating between Lover & Beloved}

\textbf{The Basis of Desire: The God, Shared Identities & the Selection of the Beloved}

When the palinode turns from beauty’s appearance in general to its appearance in the beloved, Socrates clarifies why erotic madness should be understood as divine possession. As Morgan points out, it is not that a god actively intervenes into the lover’s life. Rather, the effect of \textit{kallos} and \textit{logos} can be divine, when properly handled, because they bring the soul closer to the divine by orienting it towards the forms. Socrates elaborates, whenever the soul encounters beauty, its experience is inflected by its participation in the heavenly procession. The encounter with the beloved is no exception. The lover’s experience of his beloved is determined by the position that his soul occupied in the divine procession, more specifically, his “selection” of his beloved is determined by which god they both followed.

The basis of the lover’s attraction to his beloved, Socrates explains, is that the beloved followed in the train of the same god as himself. This is important because the desire and character of the lover and of his beloved are shaped by the image of that god. Occupying a position between the soul and the forms, the god seems to mediate the human soul’s desire for beauty, such that it provides a slightly inflected model of what it is to be beautiful. The god then simultaneously shapes the soul’s desire in terms of object-choice and its character, providing the soul with an image to desire and emulate. Socrates explains:

\begin{quote}
And so does each lover live, after the manner of the god in whose company he once was, honoring him and copying him so far as may be so long as he remains uncorrupt (\textit{adiaphthoros})… and in like manner does he comport himself toward his beloved and all other associates. \textit{And so each selects a fair one} for his love after his disposition, and even as if the beloved himself were a god he fashions for himself as it were an image, and adorns it to be the object of his veneration and worship. (252d, my emphasis)
\end{quote}

“The followers of Zeus seek a beloved who is Zeuslike,” Socrates continues, “those who were in the train of Hera look for a royal nature…. And so it is with the followers of Apollo and each other god” (252e, 253b). As important as the selection of the beloved is, it is as important to
notice that Socrates’ account of his selection hinges on the fact that throughout their lives the lover and the beloved are both caught up in the same process of transformation. The erotic pair’s shared ideal, their shared identification with the god, forms the basis of their erotic relationship. The lover’s desire for his beloved is not only based upon their shared experience of striving after the god before birth. Rather, it is the fact that this striving continues in the present, informing the way both live that establishes the commonality on which their love is based.

The process of transformation in which Socrates situates these souls extends throughout their embodied lives and beyond. Though immortal, the soul is not frozen in time. Even before birth Socrates describes the disembodied soul that “best follows (its) god” as “becom(ing) a likeness” thereof (248a, *eikasmene*). The erotic encounter is an extension and intensification of this process of “becoming godlike.” This is most obvious in the case of the lover, because Socrates focuses on him, describing his entire life as an attempt to make himself an image of his god but the same goes for the beloved. “(He) lives after the manner of the god (*kai outo kath’ ekaston theon… zde*)… honoring and copying him so far as he is able (*ekelion timon te kai mimoumenos eis dunaton*).” Not only does the term *mimoumenos* (mimesis, “copying him”) directly echo the initial characterization of the soul as becoming a likeness of his god (*eikasmene*), but the various descriptions of the lover as “liv(ing) after the manner of the god,” of comporting himself in the “manner” of his god (*tutro trope*) and so on, gesture towards what a wide variety of behaviors this process of mimesis encompasses.

It is also worth noting that this process of mimesis is explicitly tied to the issue of purity. Socrates says that the lover strives to become a likeness of his god so long as he remains “uncorrupt” (252d, *adiaphthoros*). This gives us some idea of what purity and the process of purification consists. Socrates suggests that mimesis is *catharsis*. The lover follows the god, adopting its ways, adopting its habit, and venerating it through mimesis. To do this is to purify oneself. These activities will be contrasted below with those of the lover “whose purity has been sullied” (250e, *diephtharmenos*), whose response to desire is to go groping after the flesh. We will see that there is a clear move away from physical consummation. However, first I want to note the concern with purity, because Plato’s dialogues continually come back to it. Indeed, when Socrates describes the “uncorrupt” lover as attempting to embody the image of his god, we should understand him as setting up the god as a standard of purity. The god not only provides a model for the lover to emulate, but, Socrates insists, it is only by adhering to this standard that the lover truly becomes himself. Approximating his god the lover purifies himself.

It is also important to understand that this standard is shared. Since the lover and his beloved are described as being caught up in the same transformation, striving toward the same end, the god provides a standard for beloved to live up to as well. This is why it is important to

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114 It is worth noting that the term for “becoming a likeness” (*eikasmene*) echoes the term that Socrates employs when, at the start of the myth, he notes that he cannot give a comprehensive definition (*oion men esti*) of the soul but he can discuss it through likenesses (*ho de eoiken*). What is particularly interesting about this is that there appears to be an involution in the palinode’s logic. It provides a likeness for understanding the soul, because it cannot define it, but the likeness it provides becomes regulative, defining what the soul should become. Claudia Baracchi discerns a similar involution of the logic of the forms in the *Republic*. The forms, of course, are supposed to be the original—the being, which stands outside of history/becoming and acts as the model according to which its likeness are built. However, Baracchi’s reading shows that the copies/likenesses are crucially involved in establishing the original. “Finding the essence of justice appears to be intimately intertwined with the *foundling*, with the making of the city- *eidolon*. The determination of justice would be crucially involved in… the emergence and construction of the city. Even more precisely, the *destiny (history)* of the eidetic (the eidetic, then, has a destiny) would depend upon the becoming of the city that is being produced” (10, italics original). Baracchi, Claudia. “Another Apology.” *Retracing the Platonic Text*. Eds. Russon, John and John Sallis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2000. 3-18.
keep philosophical eroticism’s concern with purity in mind, because its portrayal as a mode of purification plays an important role in justifying the lover’s disciplinary intervention into the life of his beloved. The concern with purity gives cover to the philosophical lover’s interpretive and power-laden attempt to shape the soul of his beloved. This will become clearer as we examine Socrates’ description of the lover’s erotic activities, for what we will see is that the lover is responsible for articulating the image of the god and guiding the pair’s transformation. This is an interpretive act, which gives value and form to both participants’ behaviors, cultivating some of their *erga* and *pathe* while curbing others. However, the concern with the purity of the beloved’s soul effaces the hierarchical nature of this intervention, because it portrays the lover’s “correction” of his beloved as working to restore the natural order of his soul. If the lover “purifies” his beloved, then the discipline by which he attempts to transform him is not understood as imposing an *alien ideal*, but as “demand(ing)” that he be “true to (his) own nature”—to borrow Russon’s formulation.

When commentators pick up on the language of purification or discuss the “truth” of the subject, they tend to obscure the role of the philosophical lover’s discourse in producing and imposing that truth. Russon is not unique in this respect. One can compare Aryeh Kosman’s treatment of philosophical eroticism in “Platonic Love.” Kosman does not directly address the project of transformation, but he points to the creative and interpretive work of the lover, even as he disavows it. “To love the beautiful in me is thus to love my essential being, my ‘reallest’ self…. The talk of beauty as the proper object of eros is talk of eros as directed toward what is truly native to us.” “(This) means,” he clarifies, “loving (someone) for what he is, in spite of what he may happen to be.” Kosman’s recourse to “what is truly native to us” or to “what he is, in spite of what he may happen to be” invokes a more real self—one that is more real than the empirical person the lover desires—as the proper object of the lover’s desire. That said, like Russon, Kosman disavows the interpretive work that the lover accomplishes in order to establish this “reallest” version of the beloved. As a result, he treats the move from “what (the beloved) may happen to be” to “what he is” as unproblematic, as though this were an easy distinction to make. However, there are clearly some aspects that “happen” to be part the beloved that are excluded by this translation, for otherwise this distinction is superfluous. When the lover determines what he is in spite of what his beloved happens to be, he takes it upon himself to exclude or suppress aspects of the beloved’s character.

When situated in the context of a transformative project, such exclusions become all the more important; for then, it is not just a matter of the lover understanding what he loves in the beloved. Instead, the question is about making the beloved conform to a certain ideal. The disavowal of the lover’s interpretive work obscures the other possibilities that are foreclosed when a particular understanding of the self—an “essential self,” posited by the lover—answers the question of who the beloved is, and then regulates who he will become.

*Hierarchy & Interpretation: Discerning the Lover’s Role in Philosophical Eroticism*

If hierarchical, philosophical eroticism is not unique. It is well established among historians of sexuality that Fifth Century Athenian sexual practices were a hierarchical affair. As Halperin puts it, the Athenian understanding of sexual activity reflects the strict hierarchies—between man/woman, citizen/alien, citizen/slave, man/boy, and so on—that structured Greek society. “Sex, in this system,” Halperin explains, “was not conceived as a collective

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enterprise…, but as an action performed by one person upon another; sex therefore effectively divided, classified, and distributed its participants into distinct and radically opposed categories ("penetrator" vs. "penetrated") (1990 266). This is why the pederastic relationship was the focus of such intense concern. As Michel Foucault puts it, if sexual activity was a way of asserting one’s dominance, then to play the passive role would be “to bear the marks of inferiority, submission to domination, and acceptance of servitude,” and for a youth on the cusp of adulthood that “could only be shameful.” Philosophical eroticism, however, is frequently treated as making a decisive break with the hierarchies characteristic of such erotic practices.

Halperin provides the most forceful argument for understanding philosophical eroticism as non-hierarchical. He argues that Plato’s conception of philosophical eroticism breaks from conventional Athenian pederasty because it treats the beloved as experiencing erotic desire for the lover. In “Why is Diotima a Woman?” he grounds his analysis, on a reading of the Symposium in light of the erotic connotations of Diotima’s gender. Halperin stresses that creativity (pregnancy) and reciprocity were two salient features of conventional feminine eros, which Diotima, that surprising feminine presence, appropriates for philosophical eroticism. In “Plato & Erotic Reciprocity,” Halperin argues that, when situated in its proper, historical context, the Phaedrus’ conception of anteros (“counterlove”) is quite radical.

Establishing the norm from which Plato departs, Halperin writes, “In a conventional Athenian pederastic relationship, the younger partner was not held to experience sexual desire but was expected to submit (if indeed he chose to submit at all) to the advances of his older lover out of a feeling of mingled gratitude, esteem, and affection (or philia)—rather like a good Victorian wife” (1986 64). Quoting Dover’s Greek Homosexuality, Halperin continues:

“In a homosexual relationship… the eromenos (i.e., "beloved") is not expected to reciprocate the eros of the erastes ("lover"): instead, the younger partner, if he behaves honorably, ‘does not seek or expect sensual pleasure from contact with an erastes, begrudges any contact until the erastes has proved himself worthy of concession, never permits penetration of any orifice in his body, and never assimilates himself to a woman by playing a subordinate role in a position of contact.’ With such rules in force… the hierarchical disposition of the roles enjoined upon homosexual lovers by Athenian moral convention gives rise… to a socially and psychologically asymmetrical relationship. (1986 65-66)

Against this backdrop, Halperin argues, we can understand what a profound break Plato’s approach to pederasty represents. In terms of desire, I agree, the Phaedrus’ attribution of anteros to the beloved does represent a break from convention. However, the development of anteros does not undo erotic hierarchies as Halperin suggests, but rather occasions the interpretive activity of the lover, which I argue, is what makes this practice hierarchical.

116 Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality, v. 2: The Use of Pleasure. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1985. 216. Foucault’s remarks here are uncharacteristically sweeping. He clearly shows that there were ways for the beloved to submit to a lover with his honor intact, but this was a tricky situation. To submit too easily to “the inferior and humiliating position of a pleasure object of other,” Foucault notes, “(could be seen) as morally and politically incompatible with civic responsibilities and the exercise of political power” (ibid 219). Indeed, the full citizenship of the boy and of the adults in his life could be risked if it was suspected that he submitted to a lover’s advances improperly (e.g., for money or material advantage). According to Kenneth Dover, the boy and others he was involved with (his father, his lover) were barred from holding certain civic offices if suspected of prostitution. Dover, K. J. Greek Homosexuality. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.

117 Halperin is glossing Xenophon’s Symposium 8.21, where in contrast with the woman, who is said to share in her lover’s pleasure, the boy is supposed to be “cold sober… (as) he looks upon the other drunk with sexual desire.”
Socrates describes the experience of *anteros* as being very intense:

*The stream of beauty turns back and reenters the eyes of the fair beloved. And so by the natural channel, it reaches his soul and gives it fresh vigor, watering the roots of the wings and quickening them to growth, whereby the soul of the beloved in its turn is filled with love. So he loves, yet knows not what he loves…. And when the other is beside him, he shares his respite from anguish; when he is absent, he likewise shares his longing and being longed for, since he possesses that counterlove (*anteros*) which is an image of the love, though he supposes it to be friendship rather than love, and calls it by that name. He feels a desire—like the lover’s, yet not so strong—to behold, to touch, to kiss him, to share his couch, and now ere long the desire, as one might guess, leads to the act.* (255c-e)

The beloved’s experience of *anteros* is couched in the same language of liquid flows and quickening growth as describes the lover’s passion. Indeed, it is a result of the beloved’s “stream of beauty” overflowing the lover and returning to its source. The beloved likewise experiences the wild swings between anguished longing and respite at the lover’s absence or presence. Clearly, the *anteros* that the beloved suffers is very intense. Halperin is right, this is not the mere “affection” or “esteem” that traditional pederasty attributes to the beloved. What Socrates describes is reciprocal desire.

However, Halperin is too quick to extrapolate from this reciprocity a vision of a non-hierarchical, erotic relationship. I do not contest the argument that conventional pederasty was hierarchical, but one must ask whether reciprocal desire necessarily translates into a symmetrical or non-hierarchical relationship. Can we assimilate our account of the power dynamics of this relationship to the account of desire as Halperin does? Daniel Boyarin provides a good reason to doubt this. Underscoring the traditional use of *anteros* to describe the feminine experience of desire, Boyarin argues that “Halperin’s idealizing reading of the *eros/anteros* of philosophical dialogue” is based upon an “idealizing reading of heterosex… as mutual and egalitarian.”

More specifically, he reminds us that the realm from which *anteros* is derived, heterosexual erotic practices, was anything but egalitarian. *Anteros* was considered acceptable from a woman, because she was already subjugated; so it was only “natural” for women to desire to be acted upon sexually by men.

Halperin wrongly transfers the reciprocity of *anteros*, which Socrates already qualifies in terms of strength, from desire to the practice of philosophical eroticism as a whole. The result

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119 Compare Foucault: “As for a woman’s passivity, it did denote an inferiority of nature and condition; but there was no reason to criticize it…. precisely because it was in conformity with what nature intended” (1985 216).

120 It is “like the lover’s, yet not so strong,” Socrates says. This detail is problematic for Halperin’s interpretation, because it preserves asymmetry just where he thinks Plato overcomes it. Halperin recognizes Socrates’ hedge, but attempts to explain it away, “The younger partner… is said to return (the lover’s) desire—though more weakly, Socrates hastily adds in an effort to square his account with contemporary moral standards” (1986 67). However, this explanation is weak. Why should Socrates attempt to square his eroticism with contemporary practices? Why, in particular, would he try to tame the most “radical” aspect of philosophical *eros*? This gesture seems even more incongruous when one looks at the context. For in the discussion surrounding *anteros*, Socrates repeatedly insists that the (Platonic) lover’s desire for his beloved removes him from the world of the *polis* (249d, 249e). Indeed, as the lover turns towards the forms he is said to “look down upon” the world of *doxa* and “various objects to which we now ascribe being” (247d). Socrates’ account of philosophical eroticism is openly hostile to the *polis* and the *doxa* that circulates within it, so it is not clear why he should feel compelled to square it with the conventions of the *polis*.
is that Halperin portrays philosophical eroticism as “eliminating passivity altogether” and “erasing the distinction between lover and beloved” by making a lover of the beloved (68). There is some truth to this claim; for if, as I have suggested, the philosophical lover fosters in his beloved a character and desire that mirrors his own, then he undercuts the distinction between the two. Philosophical eroticism makes a lover (of the forms) out of the beloved, and in this sense, Halperin is correct, “both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers” (68). However, there remains a crucial difference between the two.

Though the end of philosophical eroticism is marked by a convergence of identities, which would minimize hierarchy, the transformation that philosophical eroticism affects does not occur instantly. The relationship has a certain duration, during which the difference between the two remains important. Halperin’s claim that philosophical eroticism “eliminat(es) passivity altogether” seems to compress the time of relationship so that its end, which is characterized by a reduction of hierarchy, is achieved instantly. One might be more guarded in one’s interpretation of this. Indeed, Halperin himself provides us with the resources needed to question his conclusion. In “Why is Diotima a Woman?,” Halperin describes philosophical eroticism and Greek pederasty more broadly as initiation practices, and explains that they share with other male initiation rituals, “the explicit ideological basis… that men are not born but made, that boys will not become men through a natural process of unassisted growth, but must be transformed into men by means of intricate machinations (including sexual contact with grown men)” (286). Of course, philosophical eroticism excludes such contact. Nonetheless, on Halperin’s account the reduction of hierarchy seems a typical result of such practices, so to determine whether a practice is particularly hierarchical one must not look to the end but to the process.

**Signs of Hierarchy: Craft, Agriculture & Erotic Transformation**

When we take a closer look at the practice that Socrates describes, Halperin’s argument that reciprocal desire translates into a more symmetrical relationship runs into difficulties. Despite the reciprocity that *anteros* suggests, the text continues to treat the relationship as hierarchical. Socrates not only invokes a number of analogies that figure the relationship of the lover to his beloved as hierarchical—positioning them as a hunter and his quarry, a craftsman and his material/product, a farmer and his field/crop; but the practical terms in which Socrates describes the relationship consistently depicts the lover as active and (pro)creative while depicting his beloved as passive.

The *techne* and agricultural analogies are particularly interesting for the way they figure the beloved. Both figure the beloved not only as a result of the process (as the artifact and crop) but they also represent the beloved *in process* (as the material and field). This double-figuring of the beloved forces us to think about the time in which philosophical eroticism occurs, indicating how the beloved in particular changes over the course of the relationship. To a certain extent, then, they can help us correct Halperin’s compression the time in which the relationship unfolds.

When Socrates describes the interaction between the lover and his beloved, he consistently positions the lover as an agent whose action guides the pair’s transformation. One gets a sense of this already when Socrates describes the “selection” of the beloved. The lover not only “selects” the beloved and initiates the relationship (“capturing” him, as if he were his quarry) (253c);¹²¹ but he then begins to act upon his beloved. “So each selects a fair one… and

¹²¹Kenneth Dover points out that it was common for the erotic discourses of classical Athens to compare the lover and his beloved to a hunter and his quarry (86), and Socrates does not shy away from this portrayal of the erotic relationship. Far from it, when he describes the beloved as being “captured” (*airethe*), being seized) and then dwells on the “manner of capture” (253c, *alisketai… ho airetheis toiode trope*), he seems to emphasize the passivity of the
even as if the beloved himself were a god (the lover) fashions for himself as it were an image, and adorns it to the object of his veneration and worship” (252d). The lover is not simply active in the “selection” of his beloved, but he is the agent who acts upon and brings about changes in the beloved. The lover fashions an image (agalma tektainetai), the lover adorns it (katakosmei), the lover worships and venerates it. The beloved is fashioned into an image, he is adorned, worshipped, venerated, and so on. In short, the beloved is consistently treated as the object of the lover’s action. He does not appear as an equal to his erotic partner.

Techne & Eroticism. One should note the etymological connection to between the fashioning of the image in the beloved, agalma tektainetai (fashioning an image, fashioning a statue) and techne in general. After all, Socrates’ concern in the palinode and in the discussion that follows it is to develop an erotic and rhetorical techne. The same basic assumptions that guided the Gorgias’ test of the great Athenian statesmen seem to remain in place here.122 There Socrates had suggested that just as one judges a potter by his pots, so one should judge a statesmen by the citizens he produces. Socrates is not proposing a test here, but he continues to portray the relationship between the lover and his beloved as being like that of a craftsman to the material and product of his craft. When the lover looks towards his god, he looks to him as a model to be reproduced in the material before him (the beloved). The beloved, then, is the material substrate that will be made to bear the image of the god.

As Socrates continues to describe the activities of his divinely inspired lovers he begins to distinguish them by the god they followed. The reason for this is that the lovers try to produce different characters to reflect the character of their respective gods. However, regardless of whom they followed, Socrates continues to describe their activities in terms that extend the techne analogy. He does so, by continuing to describe the couple’s transformation as reproducing the image of the god: “(the lover) creates in (the beloved) the closest possible likeness to the god they worship” (253a); “(the lover) leads him on to walk in the ways of their god, and after his likeness, patterning himself thereupon and giving counsel and discipline to the boy…. Bringing the beloved to be every whit like unto himself and unto the god of their worship” (253b). Obviously, the transformation of the couple is not exclusively understood on the model of techne. For instance, the talk of “leading” and “walking in the ways of their god” does not easily fit into the schema of technical reproduction—though, this description conceives of the pair’s activities as reproducing the motion of the god’s soul, if not his image. Regardless, Socrates’ ongoing references to “likenesses,” “patterning,” “copies,” “reflections” “images” and originals organizes his understanding of philosophical eroticism. This vocabulary not only structures Socrates’ understanding of the erotic transformation according to the hierarchical coordinates of techne, with the relations between model, craftsman, and material/artifact (god, lover, and beloved) that model implies; but it also orients the whole process around the reproduction of a singular character (the god). Thus, this conception of philosophical eroticism aims to produce a homogenous product in the beloved and the lover both.

Of course, as is indicated above, the lover is also transformed by this process. He “pattern(s) himself” upon the god, so that he can offer the beloved an image to emulate. However, the fact that the lover is also subject to this transformation does not make the figuration of the beloved as the material to be transformed any less hierarchical. As the material and product of the lover’s activity, the beloved plays an exceedingly passive role. Whereas the

beloved. This is perhaps not as extreme as Socrates’ first speech, which compares the two to a wolf and a lamb (241d), but it still directs a certain amount of violence toward the beloved.

122 Gorgias 514c-516a. See my discussion of this at the end of Chapter One.
lover acts, the beloved is passive. His soul receives the lover’s action and, like marble under the sculptor’s tools, he is transformed into an image of the god.

Agriculture & Eroticism. At the end of the dialogue, the technical vocabulary of “fashioning” and “patterning” that Socrates uses to think about this relationship gives way to an agricultural analogy (276b – 277a). This move is sometimes read as relaxing the power that the lover exercises over his beloved. However, the agricultural analogy maintains the same basic hierarchies as the craft analogy. When Socrates describes the dialectician (lover, philosopher) as a farmer, who needs to find a suitable soul/soil in which to sow his logos/seed, he continues to treat the beloved as the material substrate in which the lover reproduces philosophical logos. The analogy continues to treat the philosophical lover as the active, (pro)creative partner, whose labor produces fruit in the beloved.

The agricultural analogy is part of Socrates’ critique of writing. Briefly put, it used to raise the question of where one’s discursive energies are best spent. Figuring the lover (more directly, the dialectician) as a farmer, Socrates asks where he would best plant his words/“seeds” (276c, spermat.a). Would he, like “a sensible farmer,” Socrates asks, “sow his seeds in suitable soil, and be well content if they came to maturity within eight months” (279b)? “(Or would he) with serious intent plant them during the summer in a garden of Adonis, and enjoy watching it producing fine fruit within eight days” (276b)? The question is formulated as part of Socrates’ critique of writing, so it highlights the loss of control over one’s words that one risks by committing them to writing. There are two ways in which one loses control of the written word: first, once a written text is out of one’s hands, one cannot control who it consorts with; second, one cannot clarify one’s meaning or answer for one’s words, as one could in an oral context. In terms of the analogy, then one’s “seeds” might not only end up in the wrong field, but one is also no longer in a position to care for and cultivate the seed’s potential. Obviously, Socrates’ question suggests, like the wise farmer the philosopher would only “seed” suitable fields. “The dialectician selects a soul of the right type, and in it he plants and sows his words founded on knowledge, words which can defend both themselves and him who planted them, words which instead of remaining barren contain a seed whence new words grow up in new characters, whereby the seed is vouchsafed immortality” (276e-277a). Despite the paternal affection that Socrates attributes to the farmer, who “take(s) pleasure in watching the tender plants grow” (276c), this image remains haunted by a certain hierarchy and violence. Not only is the philosophical lover shown to be more active as he “selects” a suitable field, “plants and sows” his logos there, and tends to them as a good farmer does; but the beloved plays a passive role as the soil that supports this activity. The analogy figures him as a passive medium—the soul/soil—in which the philosopher’s discourse reproduces itself.

There is a curious indifference that is shown towards the beloved here. Obviously, this is not a complete indifference, for Socrates is concerned about choosing a suitable soil (i.e., choosing a beloved/interlocutor), however the soil is chosen so that the philosopher’s words can “defend… themselves and him who planted them” and give birth to “new words (that) grow up in new characters,” thus vouchsafing their immortality. When Socrates articulates his concerns in this manner, he seems unconcerned about the future of the beloved. It is not the beloved’s immortality but the immortality of the philosopher’s logos that he is concerned about. It is not the beloved, but the philosopher’s logos (and the philosopher himself) that are defended. The beloved supports all this activity, but does not become active himself.

That is to say, the beloved does not become active and is not the object of concern, unless he is to be understood as the eventual crop of philosophical logos—as the plant that grows from
the philosopher’s seed. If that is the case, then he does become active, but it is an activity that is
generated out of the activity of the philosopher. If that is the case, as I believe it is, the
relationship remains hierarchical; for the beloved goes from being passive and penetrable (a
conventionally feminine estate) to masculine activity through the agency of his lover. This
movement maps cleanly onto Halperin’s description of the ideological assumptions of male
initiation rituals. The boy does not become a man except through the intervention of adult males,
but rather than sexual contact it is contact with the lover’s \textit{logos} makes a man out of him.

It is the pair’s initial and lingering asymmetry that makes this intervention possible.
Passive and penetrable, the beloved lends markedly feminine support to the reproductive needs
of the philosophical lover and his \textit{logos}. Indeed, the analogy itself is gendered. This analogy
was employed in the language of wedding ceremonies, “I give you this woman for the plowing
of legitimate children,” the bride’s father would say as he gave his daughter to her husband.\footnote{Halperin 1990 282. On the associations of women with soil see also Anne Carson. “Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire,” \textit{ibid.} Also relevant is the discussion of agricultural metaphors in Walsh, Cary Ellen. \textit{Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic & the Song of Songs}. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2000. 69-105.} It
seems likely that Plato is borrowing the analogy from such traditional discourses, for in this
context, the agricultural analogy is contaminated by references to socially legitimated and de-
legitimated forms of sexual reproduction. In fact, this is the source of some distortion in the
passage above. It may seem strange for Socrates to describe “the tender plants” that the
philosopher has sown as needing to “defend themselves,” much less “him who planted them,” for
we do not typically think of “tender plants” as being engaged in pitched battles. If the terms of
the analogy seem strangely violated here, it is because they have been contaminated by the
analogy of sexual reproduction. When Socrates first began his critique of writing, he described
writing as the ‘illegitimate brother’ of speech (276a). What Socrates is getting at with this
appellation is the same thing that has been described above. The author (here, father) loses
control of the word once it is written, for, unlike speech, it becomes separated from him and can
come into contact with anyone. Moreover, as an “illegitimate” child, the written word is
particularly vulnerable, for it “always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend
or help itself” (275e), but is not offered the same protections as its legitimate brother. By itself,
the agricultural image does not carry such violent connotations (though, there is some violence in
the way the farmer’s implements cut into the earth), however, the agricultural imagery is made to
carry the violent connotations because it takes over the work of the sexual analogy.

With this in mind, one should temper claims such as Martha Nussbaum’s that the
\textit{Phaedrus}’ “plant imagery” is symptomatic of a more mutual, egalitarian understanding of
philosophical eroticism. Observing that “the lover of Diotima’s ascent was… a hunter, out to
immobilize the beauty of his object,” Nussbaum argues that the \textit{Phaedrus} moves toward a more
mutual characterization of this activity (216). In the \textit{Phaedrus}, Nussbaum argues, “plant
imagery is used to characterize the receptivity and growth of the entire soul” (216). However,
while the hunting analogy is less prominent in the \textit{Phaedrus} than in other dialogues, the plant
imagery is less idyllic than she implies. The agricultural analogy, which takes over the
palinode’s references to the plantlike growth of the soul (e.g., the watering and growth of its
“roots,” 251a-b), raises the question about how ensure the growth of both souls so that their
potential is not squandered. However, its answer assumes the hierarchical roles described above.
Moreover, while the beloved is not the target of violence \textit{per se} (as he is when the lover is
figured as a hunter), this practice remains haunted by the specter of violence.
The beloved’s soul is the site of a struggle in which he does not appear to act as an agent.  He may not be entirely passive, which is why Socrates insists on the need to choose a “suitable field.”  However, one should guard against making too much of his contribution.  In “Plato’s Politic Writing and the Cultivation of Souls,” Jacob Howland argues that “the very depiction of words as seeds—as promising bits of potentiality that are, as it were, nothing in themselves—underscores the primacy of the contribution of the learner.  The point is not to collect seeds or ideas, but rather to make something of them.  The process, moreover, is in practice (if not in its ultimate goal of philosophical understanding) fundamentally open-ended” (93) Howland is right, the seed amounts to nothing without its soil.  However, his interpretation of this image goes astray in a couple of respects.  In particular, Howland strangely isolates the beloved, acting as if he cultivates the seed in the absence of his lover.  In the passage above, for instance, he speaks of collecting seeds or of making something of them as if these were activities undertaken by the beloved, but the seeds are not collected, they are sown—they are sown by the farmer (lover, philosopher).  Moreover, the farmer who sows them is also described as cultivating them through dialogue.  The whole reason that the spoken word is preferred over the written word is that the philosopher can be there to tend to them.  When he uses this image, Socrates clearly delineates between the farmer (philosophical lover) and the field (beloved); distributing the roles according to the dyadic structure of the speech situation.  When Howland says, “the soul… (is) a seed… seedbed and farmer alike; it is a working garden” (91), he conflates the lover and his beloved’s roles.  In principle there is no reason to think either partner is fundamentally incapable of playing all of these roles, but when Socrates describes the philosopher’s selection of a suitable field, he distributes the roles to different people.

In distributing the analogy’s roles as he does, Socrates figures the philosopher and his logoi, the farmer and his seed, as the active and generative agents of change.  The lover’s logos and his care give form to the field that he seeds.  It is worth pointing out that this figuration of the beloved as a sort of receptacle that receives and is transformed by the seed/logoi of his lover seems to reiterate the image that Socrates invokes when he described himself as a sort of receptacle (angeios) that had been contaminated by alien logoi (235c-d).  Like Socrates, the beloved is described as penetrable and susceptible to being transformed by the logoi that enter him.  The agricultural analogy figures the desired outcome of this sort of encounter, but it does not fundamentally change the power dynamic.

It should also be noted that this treatment of the beloved as the place, where, through his logos, the philosophical lover “begets” immortal offspring coincides with Diotima’s treatment of eros in the Symposium.  There Diotima defines love as “wanting to possess the good forever” (206a), and she claims that mortals try to achieve this end through reproduction—by “giving birth in beauty, whether in body or soul” (206b).  In saying this, Diotima assimilates the end of eros to pregnancy rather than agriculture, so the philosopher’s logoi give rise to “children” rather than “plants.”  However, in each case, the beloved is figured as a sort medium or receptacle that receives his seed, supports its growth, and eventually becomes its offspring.  As the field becomes the crop, so in his beloved, the lover’s word becomes flesh.  Insofar as these figurations of the beloved portray him as the material support for the reproduction of the lover’s logoi, they lend support to Boyarin’s basic criticism of Halperin.  “The same relations of power and hierarchy” that characterize traditional Greek pederasty also characterize philosophical eroticism,

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only instead of “gratifying the need of his erastes to penetrate his body with phallus,” “the eromenos gratifies the need of... the erastes to penetrate his mind with logos.” (Boyarin 2006 17). The lover is not depicted as mean or cynical in exercising such power, but that is beside the point. Regardless of his intentions, he clearly plays the dominant role in the relationship. The development of anteros does not change this.

Guiding Anteros: Speaking for the Speechless Partner

Rather than undoing hierarchies, the development of anteros actually affords an important opportunity for the exercise of the lover’s power over his beloved. As desire begins to well up within the beloved, he is described as sharing in the lover’s experience of eros, but the lover remains the dominant partner. Though Halperin downplays difference between the lover’s and the beloved’s experiences, he does not efface it entirely. What makes anteros palatable to a Plato’s audience, Halperin argues, is that it is not expressed sexually:

Because eros, as Diotima argues... (206e-207a), does not aim at the physical possession of a beautiful object but at the lover’s perpetual possession of the good... and because the possession of a discrete object, however enticing or adorable necessarily diverts the lover from the ultimate goal of his longing, no erotic desire... should (or, indeed, can) be sexually gratified. The Platonic doctrine thereby escapes the scandalous charge of applauding sexual passivity.... Because his (ant)eros, if guided properly, does not seek sexual consummation, the younger man is now free to return his older lover’s passion without shame or impropriety.... Thus, the way is cleared for a greater degree of reciprocity in the expression of desire and in the exchange of affection. (1986 67-68, my emphasis)

Halperin provides an apt portrayal of philosophical eroticism, but I want to note the caveat that attenuates his claim about reciprocity. “(Ant)eros,” he says, “if guided properly, does not seek sexual consummation.” Though easy enough to overlook, the conditional clause—“if guided properly”—testifies to the ongoing hierarchy of this erotic practice. Indeed, it preserves a trace of it even as Halperin disavows it.

The need to furnish anteros with the proper guidance—that is, the need to guide the beloved— is clearly indicated by the text. When Socrates describes anteros as welling up within the beloved, he attributes to the beloved, “a desire... to behold, to touch, to kiss... (and) to share (his lover’s) couch” (255e). However, as Halperin notes, Socrates does not condone this sort of behavior; otherwise, he would suffer “the scandalous charge of advocating sexual passivity.” As Halperin notes, there is a crucial move away from the body that is needed in order to make anteros acceptable. It is important to notice, however, that the beloved does not make this move on his own. If he is to properly act upon his desire, he needs to be steered away from his initial impulse to act on his desire physically. His desire does not inevitably conform to the demands of philosophical eroticism. This means that in order for the beloved to enjoy the increased freedom and reciprocity that Halperin describes his desire first must be redirected by the lover. In other words, the he is “free to return his older lover’s passion” and enjoy “a greater degree of reciprocity in the expression of desire,” provided that he expresses his desire in the manner consistent with what his lover demands. What Halperin’s caveat testifies to, then, is an ongoing asymmetry that structures the whole relationship. The lover sets the terms by which the beloved conducts himself.

Philosophical eroticism tries to reproduce an original identity that is shared by the lover and his beloved, so it is correct to expect that this practice will be marked by a convergence of identities and a reduction of hierarchy. However, Socrates’ description of this relationship
testifies to an ongoing hierarchy. The reason for this is that the lover and his beloved begin the relationship with different understandings of themselves and their desires; and, Socrates implies, the lover has a better understanding of what they both desire. This initial asymmetry structures the whole relationship; for, more than anything else, philosophical eroticism is characterized as the lover’s attempt to “counsel and discipline” his beloved (253b, peithontes kai ruthmizdentes),\(^{125}\) so that he will accept and conform to the lover’s understanding of himself and his desire. This is why, even as Halperin downplays the hierarchical character of this practice, he cannot help but to preserve some record of this asymmetry. Anteros does not undo hierarchies. Rather, when it wells up inside the beloved, the lover seizes on the opportunity to interpret it as a desire for the forms and to reorient it away from his body. This intervention into the erotic life of the beloved, this turning of the beloved’s desire from the body of the lover toward his god and the forms is what philosophical eroticism consists of; and it is clearly the task of the lover to provide this guidance.

It is worth saying a bit more about the state in which the beloved finds himself when anteros overcomes him. As Halperin notes, anteros needs guidance. However, the beloved clearly cannot provide this himself. Socrates portrays the beloved as utterly confused by his experience. In the passage describing the development of anteros, Socrates stresses this repeatedly: “he loves, yet knows not what he loves (era men oun, houto de aporei); he does not understand, he cannot tell what has come upon him (kai outh hoti peptonthen oiden oud echei phrasai),” “he cannot account for it, not realizing that his lover is as it were a mirror in which he beholds himself,” “he supposes (his anteros) to be friendship rather than love, and calls it by that name” (255d-e). In a couple of short lines, this passage could hardly underscore the beloved’s confusion more. The beloved does not understand what he suffers. He is speechless, unable to say what is happening to him (“he cannot tell”); and, when he is not at a loss for words, he applies the wrong words to the situation (calling his eros “friendship”). He does not understand his desire, and so he does not understand himself. This is why he does not understand that he is confronted with his mirror image and that the beauty that he is so struck by is actually his own.

The beloved’s confusion justifies the lover’s intervention into his erotic life. The lover’s logoi provide a crucial supplement for the beloved, interpreting his desire and articulating its ends. The lover speaks when the beloved is speechless. The lover corrects him when he applies the wrong words to his eros; and so, the lover’s discourse lifts the beloved out of his confusion.

The most important aspect of the beloved’s confusion concerns the end towards which he strives. Anteros initially aims at physical gratification, but Socrates is clear that this is not the true end of his desire. The desire for physical gratification is a sign of the beloved’s confusion, and it requires the lover’s attention if it is to be cleared up. Reverting to the image of the soul as a chariot, Socrates describes the couple’s encounter:

> When they lie side by side, the wanton horse of the lover’s soul would have a word (echei hoti lege) with the charioteer, claiming (axioi) a little guerdon for all his trouble. The like steed in the soul of the beloved has no word to say (echei men ouden eipein), but swelling with desire for he knows not what (spargon de

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\(^{125}\) Again the parallels between the Phaedrus’ description of philosophical eroticism and the Gorgias’ description of the true political techne are striking. There Socrates says that the great statesmen were good at gratifying their audiences’ desires, “but as to giving those desires a different direction… by persuading and compelling (peithontes kai biazdomenoi) citizens to adopt courses that would improve them,” they were failures (517b). The crucial task of “persuading and compelling (the audience)” to change what they desire, with which Socrates charges the true politician is repeated almost verbatim in the Phaedrus’ description of the lover’s activities.
kai aporon periballei), embraces and kisses the lover, in grateful acknowledgement of all his kindness. (255e-256a, my emphasis)

In contrast to the fluency and clarity of the lover, the beloved is again at a loss for words. Socrates not only marks the contrast with a parallel construction, saying that lover’s horse “would have a word” (echei hoti lege) while the beloved’s “has no word to say” (echei menouden eipein), but he also contrasts the mental clarity of the one with the other. The lover’s base horse “claims” or “thinks himself worthy” (axioi) of gratification, but the beloved does not even know what he wants. He has no words to understand his desire so he endorses the course of action the lover proposes. He embraces and kisses his lover, and “is not minded to refuse (him)” (256a), but his willingness is treated as a sign of his confusion not an expression of his true desire. The beloved’s understanding of his desire has reached an aporia (aporon), so he takes direction from the lover’s words. He seems to require them in order to act upon his desire at all.

The beloved’s aporia, which is also mentioned at 255d,126 should be contrasted not only with the clarity of the lover’s self-understanding in the immediate context, it should also be read against Socrates’ description of the lover’s act of “follow(ing) up the trace” of his god and “find(ing) a way” (euporousi) back to him (252e). The fact that the beloved is said to be in a state of aporia, without poros, without a passage or even a clear destination puts him in the position to follow the poros onto which the lover leads him. By attributing to the lover a greater understanding of his own desire, Socrates puts him in a position of authority over the beloved. He becomes the interpreter of the latter’s desire, whose task is to teach the beloved how to love. This is consistent with the role that is attributed to the lover throughout their relationship. Though his activities are described analogically as “craft” or as “farming,” because they produce a certain type of character (their product, their crop); in practical terms the lover’s activities are typically discursive. This is part of philosophical eroticism’s move away from the body. The seed the lover sows is his logos. He displaces intercourse with discourse when he provides the “counsel and discipline” that “leads (his beloved) to walk in the ways of their god” (253b).

I have thus far only traced the interplay between the speech and silence of the lover and his beloved’s “lower elements” (their dark horses). There are other parts of the soul, so this is only part of the story. However, as Socrates describes the resistance of the other portions of the pair’s souls to these carnal impulses, he evokes the same sort of exchange. He continues:

And when they lie by one another he is minded not to refuse to do his part in gratifying the lover’s entreaties; yet his yokefellow in turn, being moved by reverence and heedfulness, joins with the driver in resisting. And so, if the victory be won by the higher elements..., guiding them into the ordered rule of the philosophical life, their days on earth will be blessed... for the power of evil in the soul has been subjected, and the power of goodness liberated; they have won self-mastery and inward peace. And when life is over, with burden shed and wings recovered they stand victorious in... that truly Olympic struggle. (256a-b)

The beloved’s confusion must be, at least temporarily, heightened as the other portions of his soul resist the call of his own and the lover’s dark horses to act out his desire physically. Socrates does not specify whether the beloved’s higher elements have a different object in mind, but he is clear that they do not consent to the end proposed by the lover’s dark horse and endorsed by his own. So there exists an intra-psychic conflict, which pits different parts of the beloved against one another (the charioteer and noble horse against the base one. What is interesting about this conflict is that it is never fully contained within the psyche of the beloved.

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126 “He loves, yet knows not what” (255d, era men oun, houtou de aporei).
The conflict is aggravated and resolved through the agency of the lover. Socrates describes the lover’s potential to support either side of the conflict. In the case of the beloved’s carnal impulses, the lover’s logos goads them to action by proposing an end to pursue. When the beloved’s base horse struggles to understand what it wants, it gets direction from the lover. Thus, Socrates describes the beloved as acquiescing to the lover’s will when he does not “refuse” the lover’s “entreaties.” Obviously, the beloved is not wholly passive in this. He exercises some will in saying “yes” or “no,” but the lover clearly occupies a more powerful position in this interaction. The lover’s entreaties articulate their possible ends while his beloved simply endorses or refuses them. It is worth noting that this exchange appears to duplicate the classic interaction of the dialectic. The lover, like the dialectical questioner guides the conversation by posing questions that call for assent or refusal while his interlocutor chooses from the options offered him. This resemblance hardly seems coincidental given that the main practical activity that philosophical eroticism undertakes is dialogue—the lover’s “counsel and discipline.”

On the other hand, when Socrates describes the victory of “the higher elements,” it is again apparent that the lover plays a crucial role. This is signaled by the fact that the victory is described as being won together. While Socrates’ initial reference to the resistance of “his yokefellow” (the noble horse) and “the driver” clearly refers to these elements of the beloved, his subsequent references to “the higher elements” and their experiences as “they… (win) self-mastery” and “they stand victorious in… that truly Olympic struggle,” no longer distinguish the beloved from his lover. Socrates’ depiction of this victory evokes the experience of conversation less directly than his description of dark horses’ conspiracy. However, given that the pair’s lower elements are depicted as conversing, and given that the lover’s own psychic struggle is depicted as unfolding through an exchange of logos between the driver and his steeds, the higher elements’ victory would seem to register the effect of conversation. The psychic community, both intra- and inter-, is forged in conversation.

The collective nature of this victory, however, should not be taken as indicating that the pair’s relationship is lived out on equal terms. Given how Socrates marks the difference between the two characters before this convergence, particularly in terms of their ability to understand and speak of their desire, it is difficult to believe that they are equal partners in this victory.

127 According to Socrates, as the lover begins to approach his beloved, he simultaneously masters himself. He stages the lover’s approach of his beloved as a struggle between the different characters assembled in his chariot. The dark horse “shamelessly plunges on” and would “force (the driver and noble horse) to a monstrous and forbidden act” with the beloved (254e, 254b), but the driver and noble horse resist. The scene consists of a strange mixture of physical violence and conversation. The dark horse is “hard to control with whip and goad,” so he struggles, pulls, bites and compels the others to approach the beloved and he must be forced into submission by his driver (253e-254e). This is pretty much how one would expect the chariot analogy to work. Physical force seems the natural currency of the chariot. At the same time, however, the struggle takes place as a verbal exchange. The dark horse “reminds” his companions of “the delights of love’s commerce” (254a); “they yield and agree to do his bidding” (254b), but when they stop short the dark horse “bursts into angry abuse, railing at the charioteer and his yokefellow” (254d); they “beg him to delay” and he “grudgingly consents” (254d). So it goes, until eventually, though a mixture of physical force and conversation “the evil steed… obeys the counsel of his driver” (254e). The victory of the higher elements in the erotic relationship repeats this process, except that there are now two souls involved in the struggle, one of which, the lover’s, had already won such a contest before.

128 Compare Socrates’ description of thinking as the soul’s “inner-dialogue” in Theaetetus. “When the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them, and saying yes or no…. When doubt is over and the two voices affirm the same thing, then we call that its ‘judgment’” (189e-190a, see also Sophist 263e).
Even though their “higher elements” are said to aim at the same ends, it is unlikely that the contribution of each character would be the same. Rather, one would expect that the lover continues to speak for both members of the erotic pair, his logoi offering the beloved the terms according to which he ought to understand himself and live his life. So, just as the lover’s entreaties call the beloved’s base horse to action, the lover’s logoi would also seem to deserve credit for “(subjecting) the power of evil in the soul” and “(liberating) the power of goodness.”

**Becoming-God, Becoming-Lover: Mediating the Beloved’s Transformation**

If the philosophical lover’s discourse supplants the beloved’s silence, articulating and giving form to his otherwise speechless partner’s desire; then it is his logos that puts an end to the beloved’s aporia and the confused response of seeking sexual gratification, which grows therefrom. Instead of sex, the lover’s logos offers the beloved a poros or passage back to what, Socrates insists, is his dimly held the ethical ideal (the god) and his lost home (the realm of the forms, where his desire “naturally” inclines). This passage is described as returning both partners to their natural state. It is important to note, however, that this passage travels through the lover, so, though philosophical eroticism is homogenizing in its effect, the course of the pair’s desire is not quite symmetrical. Both participants strive to become likenesses of their god, but the beloved also assimilates the character of his lover.

According to Socrates, the lover approaches the beloved as he approaches himself, looking upon him as something to be transformed into an image of his god. This means that the erotic encounter should not only be understood as transformative, but that it needs to be understood as a privileged episode in a process of transformation that extends through the entire lives of its participants. The erotic encounter is privileged because it intensifies this process of transformation, pushing both participants towards their shared standard, the god. Of course, part of the intensity of this process is owed to the role that beauty plays in the encounter. The Phaedrus consistently attests to beauty’s power to move the soul. However, there is more important reason that this encounter is privileged.

The erotic encounter intensifies the transformation of the soul because it clarifies the end towards which its participants strive. The god is described as the implicit end toward which the lover strives throughout his life, but when confronted with his beloved, he is afforded the opportunity to recognize this model as such. According to Socrates, the lover comes to know the god towards whom he strives—and hence, himself—better as he grapples with the problem of how to produce the god’s character in his beloved:

> Every lover is fain that his beloved should be of a nature like to his own god (ton spheteron paidia pephukenai)… (so) he leads him on to walk in the ways of their god, and after his likeness, patterning himself thereupon and giving counsel and discipline to the boy (mimoumenoi autoi te kai ta paidika peithontes kai ruthmizdentes eis to ekeinou epitedeuma kai idean agousin)… Every act is aimed at bringing the beloved to be every whit like unto himself and unto the god they worship (all’ eis homoioteta autois kai to theo... agein). (253b-c)

The lover’s task of creating a likeness of the god in his beloved and himself is all-consuming. This is a far cry from the lover-become-animal, whose corrupt desire sends him groping after the flesh. The entire existence of Socrates’ “true and perfect lover” is colored by the problem of becoming godlike (253c). This project requires some ingenuity, for though he clearly takes the lead in the relationship—“capturing” his beloved, giving him counsel, providing him a model to emulate, and imposing discipline and order upon him (253b-c)—at the start of the transformation the lover does not necessarily grasp its end. “If they have not aforetime trodden this path
(embebosi to epitedeumati),” Socrates says (again inscribing the soul’s desire and motion on the path of its god), they have “(to learn) the way from any source” (252e). Now, since all lovers have at least begun to tread this path by themselves, in the procession before birth and in their manner (tropos) of life, they find in themselves a resource—the poros, the passage—they seek.

The result is that the lover himself—his own character and habit—becomes the guide for the couple’s transformation. As the lover searches for clues about how best to make his beloved conform to their model, he inevitably turns towards himself. Socrates describes his efforts:

As they follow up the trace within themselves of the nature their own god they find a way (euporousi), insomuch as they are constrained to fix their gaze upon him, and reaching after him in memory they are possessed by him (kai ephaptomenoi autou te mnemne enthousiontes), and from him they take their character and pursuits (eks ekeinou lambanousi ta ethe kai epitedeumata). But all this… they attribute to the beloved. (252e-253a, translation modified)

It is important to be clear that the agent of the action described above is the lover (or rather, lovers in general). As the final line of the quote indicates (“this… they attribute to the beloved”), when Socrates says “they follow up the trace (of their god)… they find their way” and so on, “they” refers to lovers, not their beloveds. The lover remains the agent of action throughout Socrates’ discussion of the various types of lovers (252c-253c) and throughout his discussion of philosophical eroticism as a whole. One should not make the mistake that Nussbaum does when she construes “they” in this section as referring to both members of the couple. Invoking this same passage, Nussbaum claims, “Each, through complex responses and interactions, comes… to understand and honor the ‘divinity’ of the other person (252d); his effort is to know the other’s character through and through. This leads, further, to increased self-understanding, as they ‘follow up the trace within themselves of the nature of their own god.’”129 The text is clear that it is the lover who takes the lead and undertakes these actions. Reading “they” as referring to both members of the couple conceals the different roles that that each plays, concealing as well the hierarchy implied therein. The result is of this misinterpretation of “they” is a more egalitarian, but also non-Platonic picture of philosophical eroticism.

It is not that the lover fully comprehends where the erotic transformation is headed. When he follows up the trace of his god, he undoubtedly comes to understand himself, his god, and his differently. Nussbaum is right to connect this to an increased “self-understanding.” However, despite the fact that the lover learns and changes, he is still consistently positioned as an authority over his beloved. He not only acts as his beloved’s guide, leading, counseling and disciplining him, he also provides a model to emulate. “Patterning himself” upon the likeness of his god, he becomes a pattern for his beloved to follow. This is why, Socrates says, the lover “aims at bringing the beloved to be every whit like unto himself and unto the god they worship.” It is not just the god’s character that the beloved assimilates. He assimilates the lover’s as well.

This is a disturbing aim of philosophical eroticism that is rarely discussed. As much as scholars celebrate the open-ended quality of this practice, they seldom face the fact that philosophical eroticism aims to extinguish the difference between the lover and his beloved altogether. It is only by eliding the role of the lover or the initial difference between two that scholars are able to eschew this issue. For instance, when Howland claims that philosophical eroticism “is in practice (if not in its ultimate goal…) fundamentally open-ended,” he is only able to maintain his position regarding this practice by eliding the lover’s role in cultivating the

potentialities of his discourse. That is to say, only by eliding the lover’s role as the agricultural analogy’s farmer and mapping all of its terms onto the beloved, can Howland erase the practical role that the lover plays in giving form to the beloved’s soul. As we saw, Halperin similarly downplays of the lover’s intervention into the *anteros* of his partner.

Jean-Pierre Vernant rightly cautions us that the lover does not aim to reproduce himself “as is” in the beloved (474). That is, he does not aim to reproduce an exact likeness of his present self, but strives to reproduce the image of the god. Thus, when the lover looks to himself, as when he looks to his beloved, what he seeks, Vernant explains, “is not our human face…, but that of the god by whom we are possessed… who, transforming our face… (and) that of our partner, illuminates both of them with a flash that comes from elsewhere” (471). It is the god’s likeness the lover seeks and whose qualities he fosters. This means that the path of lover’s desire ends neither at beloved nor at himself, but instead, “aims toward the sky, redirecting the lover and the beloved upward… reattaching them, not to each other, but to their common home” (Vernant 471). This is where the lover’s desire ultimately leads—to the heavens, to the god, to the forms.

However, though Vernant’s description of the course of desire is apt in terms of its ultimate aims, the circuit that it travels is more complicated than he suggests. After initially carrying the lover towards his beloved, desire boomerangs. The lover’s desire and gaze returns to himself before it turns up to the god. It finds its way to the god in the lover himself. Vernant downplays the second portion of this movement, the passage through the lover; and as a result, he arrives at a more open-ended understanding of philosophical eroticism. Socrates’ lover does not simply seek to reproduce himself, as is, in the beloved. He changes in this encounter. However, Vernant goes too far when he says that the lover “decipher(s)”—and begins to become—“the extreme other,” “the radically distant” (475). The lover does not always clearly grasp the end of the erotic encounter. Indeed, he is sometimes confused, but the movement that carries the pair towards their god clearly passes through him. In the habit (the *tropos*)—the twists and turns of his personality—they find their way (their *poros*) back to the god.

With this in mind, it is difficult to justify claims as strong as Vernant’s about the role that is played by otherness in this relationship. Socrates’ account of desire, after all, is not only premised on sameness—the shared, mythic identity of the pair—but it insists that the proper erotic practice cultivates that sameness, making the lover and the beloved conform to the same model, making the beloved “every whit like unto himself (the lover).” In the mythic past of philosophical eroticism as in its future, all difference dissolves. It should be acknowledge that it is not a very robust conception of the other that eradicates difference.

III. *In the Mood for Love: Ambivalence, Detachment & Erotic Transformation*

It is difficult to provide an exhaustive account of everything that the philosophical lover’s discipline entails because it touches on all of the soul’s relationships. Moreover, if there is merit to the suggestion that the *Phaedrus* does not treat the soul as something distinct from its *erga* and *pathe*, then the task of describing the pair’s erotic transformation is only more difficult, because the soul cannot be treated as an isolated, atomic unit of analysis. Rather than discussing “the soul’s relationships” as if they were separable from the soul and possessed by it, it might be better to say that philosophical eroticism or discipline shapes all of the relationships that constitute the soul. This explains Socrates’ insistence on the need to understand “the nature of

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130 See my discussion of the soul at the start of chapter three.
the world as a whole” in order to understand “the nature of the soul” (Phaedrus 270c), which, of course, is precisely what the myth tries to do when it situates the soul in the heavenly procession, making its erga and pathe intelligible against the cosmic horizon. If the soul cannot be separated from the passions and actions that constitute it, then it is not ultimately separable from the world of relations in which they are lived out. One can, however, begin to identify how erotic discipline shapes some of the soul’s more prominent relationships; and in this way, one can discern the direction of the ethical transformation that philosophical eroticism affects.

To varying degrees, we have already run into the most important of the soul’s relationships, but it bears returning to some of them. In particular, it is worth returning to the Phaedrus’ problematization the soul’s relation to beauty, for this incorporates the soul’s relation to images, the senses, its body and to the beloved who instantiates beauty. In the dialogue’s problematization of these relations there emerges a pattern. Philosophical eroticism cultivates an ethic of detachment. In light of the Phaedrus’ exceedingly fluid conception of the soul this seems paradoxical. For while the Phaedrus conceives of the soul as inseparable from its passions and actions, which means that it is inseparable from the objects that it desires, the philosophical lover’s discipline seems to aim at just that sort of separation. The lover incites his beloved to detach himself from the particular, sensuous objects that attract him, including the lover himself. To wit, the beloved is described as being trained to resist the force of such desirable appearances through his engagement with those very appearances.132

Beauty & Its Appearances: At the close of chapter four, when describing the effect that beauty has upon the soul, we saw how ambivalent the experience of it can be. Beauty’s appearance or likeness promises to nourish the lover’s soul, but only if it prompts him to recall

131 A quick note about this phrase is in order. Socrates refers to “the nature of the world as a whole” in the discussion of rhetoric that follows the Phaedrus’ speeches. There he argues that rhetoric must to understand the soul if it is to induce the psychic effects that it wants. Otherwise, he argues, the rhetorician resembles a “madman,” who calls himself a doctor because he is able to produce some effects in the body of his patient by applying drugs, though he has no understanding of how they work or what is really good for the patient (268c). (This, of course, is why Socrates places the definition of the soul and the treatment of its erga and pathe at the center of his erotic and rhetorical theories). After establishing this point explicitly, Socrates underscores how demanding of a task this is. “Do you think… it is possible,” he asks Phaedrus, “to reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the world as a whole?” (270c). It has been noted that the Greek is ambiguous. The phrase that is translated above as “the nature of the world as a whole,” tes tou holou phuseos, more strictly refers to “the nature of the whole.” I think that Woodruff and Nehamas are right to eliminate the ambiguity of the phrase in the translation above, but it could also be translated, as “the nature of the soul… as a whole” (Hackforth). It is a matter of interpretation. However, as Ferrari points out, the latter rendering seems redundant given that Socrates has just declared the need to understand the nature of the soul (247-248 n17). As Ferrari also points out, Phaedrus’ follow up, “if we’re to listen to Hippocrates… we won’t even understand the body if we don’t follow that method,” should be read as indicating the need to situate the soul in its proper context. One need only think of the Hippocratic text, On Airs, Waters, and Places, to justify understanding the reference to Hippocrates in this manner. The most basic insight of that text is that medicine’s object of care (the body) is inseparable from the place—the seasons, the winds, the water, the air—in which it lives. Socrates seems to be making the same point about the soul. Hippocrates. On Airs, Waters and Places. Trans. Francis Adams. Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2007.

132 A perfect example of this comes from the Gorgias. In the exchange that chapter three discussed at length, when Socrates proposes that Callicles think of the undisciplined soul as a leaky jar (pithos) whose perforations subject it to forces from the outside, Socrates uses a poetic image as part of his attempt to goad him into desiring discipline (493a-494a). This is paradoxical, because, to be effective, the poetic image depends upon Callicles’ openness—it depends upon his being, like the perforated jar, open to external influence, it depends upon him being movable, persuadable; however, the effect that the image intends is discipline, and according to the terms of the analogy, that would close the openings on which its effectiveness depends. If successful, then, the image undoes the conditions on which its effectiveness depends, training Socrates’ interlocutor to better resist such images in the future.
his vision of beauty itself. If such recollection fails to take place, if beauty’s appearance is not
revealed as a mere likeness that points beyond itself toward the purer, more encompassing
vision, then it is understood as a corrupting influence. Violating the boundaries and will of the
subject—since what one really desires is “beauty itself,” not its “likeness”—beauty’s appearance
enslaves the soul. When that happens, the lover is bound to and kept dependent upon specific
objects, which only partially fulfill his desire. Such a lover is enthralled by the appearance of his
beloved in all his or her specificity—the color of the beloved’s eyes, his crooked smile, her
skinny arms. However, if what the lover truly desires is “beauty itself,” and such appearances
are not what it consists of, then such attachments arrest his pursuit of his true desire and subject
him to the force of alien appearances.

The impure lover, whose “four-footed” pursuit of his beloved turns him into a beast,
figures the risk of overvaluing the particular, fleshy instantiations of beauty. Head low, he fails
to look toward the forms; so he is unable to break the chains that bind him to the particular, doxic
appearances of beauty. As a result, he is subjected to the whims of chance appearances, being
pulled in one direction or another depending on what he happens upon. Instead of the
unwavering, vertical ascent of the gods and those who follow them, the brute lover’s soul suffers
an inconstant, horizontal zigzagging motion, as the chains that bind it to a myriad of appearances
pull it in conflicting directions. The spell that beauty’s varied appearances cast over the brute
lover, which keeps him enthralled, can only be broken by recalling the vision of “beauty itself.”

“Beauty itself,” the standard that the brute lover fails to recall, frees the “pure” lover from
the bonds of beauty’s likenesses by making them intelligible. This not only involves recognizing
the appearance as a “likeness” of “beauty itself,” so that the beloved appears as a particular,
impure instantiation of a more comprehensive, purer and more valuable quality; it also involves
depriving the appearance of its power. When compared to the ideal in all its imagined splendor,
the status of the erotic object is not only diminished, but so is its power to command the lover’s
attention. Since this shift in perspective changes the lover’s understanding of what he desires,
this might be described as an epistemological or theoretical achievement. However, the effort to
understand the object of his desire as a “likeness” of beauty itself is no less an ethical one. The
lover’s changing understanding of what he wants when he wants his beloved entails tangible
changes in how he comports himself toward his beloved and the world as a whole. As John
Russon argues, a change in the lover’s understanding of himself necessarily entails a change in
how he inhabits the world, “an advance in knowledge is inseparable from a fundamental change
in behaviour that… embodies that knowledge” (123). However, I would underscore the
speculative and interpretive nature of this “advance.” Socrates does not establish the necessity of
thinking about desire in terms of the forms much less that everyone’s desire conforms to the
model he proposes. Rather, he demands that his interlocutor recognize his desire as taking the
form that he describes.

The dialectic offers the philosophical lover a key support for bringing about this change
in his beloved’s interpretation of his desire. The move to subsume beauty’s appearances under a
single eidos that is forever the same subjects the beloved’s interpretation of his desire for the
beautiful to a rule. Embedded in dialectic is the epistemological demand that one concede that
what elicits desire is and ought to always be the same; that beauty is the same from context to
context, from individual to individual; that what is valued in one instance as beauty or justice or
wisdom is what is valued in another. That this assumption undergirds and is enforced by
Socrates’ dialectical practice is evidenced by the way in which he calls his interlocutors to
“testify” against themselves (Gorgias 472b-c, 474b, 482b). By insisting on the question, “what
is x?,” insisting that the answer be universal in scope and regulating what considerations are admitted to the discussion. Socrates pushes his interlocutors to develop more abstract positions. Thus, though his interlocutors have some input, Socrates’ formulation and reiteration of the question plays a crucial role in shaping the conversation’s outcome. His questions push his interlocutors to abstract their answers from the specific contexts to which they initially refer, broadening the scope of the answer and changing the content of the response. Socrates, nonetheless, holds his interlocutor responsible for the universalized version of his local commitment and insists that if his he does not avow the conversation’s implications, then he “testifies against himself.” However, this testimony, this capacity for self-contradiction, does not act as a condemnation of one’s position, unless one has already presupposed the basic principle that what is desirable is always the same.

The Gorgias provides a striking example of Socrates’ strategy of confronting his interlocutor with an alternate vision of himself. When Callicles questions the sincerity with which Socrates holds the position that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it (481b), Socrates insists that he not only believes it but that Callicles does as well. Socrates does not just claim that Callicles is wrong to doubt Socrates’ position or even that Callicles is insincere. At the very start of their conversation, Socrates tells him, “Callicles himself will not agree with you, Callicles” (482b, ou soi homologesei Kallikles, o Kallikleis); and again, later, “Callicles will not (agree)… when he comes to know himself aright” (495e, hotan autos hauton theasetai orthos). What is so striking in Socrates’ assertions is that he claims a privileged knowledge not about the good, but about Callicles himself. He claims to know who his interlocutor is and what he desires, better than his interlocutor himself. Fortunately, Socrates implies, he is there to correct his interlocutor’s mistaken vision of himself, so that he can come to see himself as he really is. This other Callicles—this other self, his purer, truer self—is produced through the dialectic and is called upon to testify against the empirical Callicles.

Thus we see Socrates attempting to open a rift in the subjectivity of his interlocutor. Privileging the version of his interlocutor who agrees with Socrates’ understanding of desire, Socrates works to get his interlocutor to accept the Socratic interpretation of himself. We see the same thing in the Phaedrus. The Phaedrus incorporates more discursive forms into the philosopher’s repertoire, so there is less emphasis on the dialectic as a discursive form, which by way of question and answer produces this effect. Nonetheless, “dialectician” is the name that Socrates gives to the speaker who perfects the power of collection and division inherent in all logos, whereby one moves from the multiplicity of the present to the singular, unchanging vision of eidos (266b, 249b-c); and this process returns the soul to its natural condition—its orientation toward the forms. Insofar as the practice of dialectic, whether understood as “collection and division” or as the practice of short question and answer, continually points beyond beautiful appearances, it trains the philosopher’s beloved to look beyond the world for the true object of his desire. And that changes the way he inhabits the world.

Apathy or Divine Indifference. Socrates repeatedly notes the lover’s changing attitude toward the world around him, but nowhere is he more forceful than in an initial description of the

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133 In the Laches, for example, Socrates redirects Laches’ initial identification of courage with the action of the soldier who stays at his post. “I was to blame in having put my question badly, and… this was the reason for your answering badly. For I meant to ask you not only about the courage of the heavy-armed soldiers, but about the courage of cavalry and every other style of soldier—and not only who are courageous in war, but… who in disease, or in poverty, or again in politics…. I was asking about courage and cowardice in general…. What is that common quality, which is the same in all these cases, and which is called courage?” (Laches 191c-e)

134 Socrates makes similar claims about Polus (Gorgias 471e, 472b-c).
power of recollection. “The sum and substance of all our discourse (comes to this),” he says, “(When a lover) beholds the beauty of this world, is reminded of true beauty, and his wings begin to grow; then is he fain to lift his wings and fly upward; yet he has not the power, but inasmuch as he gazes upward like a bird and cares nothing for the world beneath, men charge… that he is demented” (249e, my emphasis, compare 249c). What a strange effect desire has, when the lover “cares nothing for the world below” (ton kato de amelon). Yet, this is consistently treated as an effect of philosophical eroticism.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima paints an even starker picture of the withdrawal of the lover’s desire from the world around him. She describes a similar reorientation of the lover from the beauty of his beloved’s body (i.e., “beauty’s likeness”) to “beauty itself,” describing the path his desire takes along the way. According to her, a lover who loves well will begin by loving the body of his beloved. However, realizing that “the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of another (somati to epi hetero somati adelphon) and that… (he would) be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same (hen te kai tauton),” Diotima’s lover learns to love the beauty of all bodies (210b). This is followed by a series of ascending steps, wherein the love of bodies is displaced by the love of beautiful souls, of laws and institutions, of the sciences and, finally, the lover experiences a beatific vision of beauty itself (210b-211a). It is unnecessary to walk through the whole ascent, but it is worth pointing out that at each step along the way, Diotima notes the lover’s changing attitude towards the object that formerly occupied him. When the lover grasps that the beauty of all bodies is the same, for instance, Diotima says, “he must think of this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it” (210b, kataphronesanta kai smikron hegesamenon). Again, as he transitions from the love of bodies to the love of souls, “he will think the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance” (210c, to soma kalon smikron ti hegesetai einai). Finally, as the lover ascends from the love of beautiful customs to the beauty of knowledge, “he look(s)… not at beauty in a single example—as a servant (oiketes, house slave) would who favored the beauty of a little boy or a man or a single custom (being a slave, of course, he’s low and small-minded) (douleuon phaulos e kai smikrologos)—but the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty” (210d-e). As the lover ascends to the love of knowledge and finally to the vision of the form itself, Diotima describes him as reevaluating all of his previous loves and, one by one, dismissing them. The love of bodies, the love of souls, the love of beautiful customs, all are found to be small and trifling (smikron, phaulos, smikrologos). All are slavish (oiketes, douleuon) when compared to the love of the forms. Indeed, they are not only trifling but, like the *Phaedrus*, the bonds that bind one to such objects appear to be the chains that keep one in a state of servitude.135

Because the ascent of Diotima’s lover is more articulated than that of the *Phaedrus’* lover, Diotima has more opportunity to reflect on the changing attitudes of philosophical lover. As a result, her testimony to the ever-diminishing place occupied by the beloved in the lover’s world is more emphatic, but the movement that both texts describe is largely the same. Like the *Phaedrus*’ lover, who comes to look down upon and “care nothing” (amelon) for the world below, the ascent of Diotima’s lover affects a reevaluation of all his previous desires. These must be put in their place, “despised” (kataphronesanta, “looked down upon”), if the lover is to

135 Anne-Marie Bowery makes the same point in “Responding to Socrates’ Pedagogical Provocation.” *Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*. Boston, MA. 10-15 August 1998. She argues that Aristodemus’ love is “submissive and servile” (2), because it fixates on the words and behaviors of Socrates rather than moving toward the good.
progress in his erotic education. The reorientation of the lover’s soul, in the *Phaedrus*, as in the *Symposium*, leaves any particular appearance of beauty diminished.

This cannot leave lover’s judgment of his beloved unaffected. The beloved, after all, is a part of the world that the lover comes to look down upon. The game seems to be rigged against the beloved. As Gregory Vlastos observes, “The individual cannot be as lovable as the Idea; the Idea, and it alone, is to be loved for its own sake; the individual only so far as in him and by him ideal perfection is copied fugitively in the flux” (1981 34). Indeed, when any instance of beauty is understood as a “likeness” or an approximation of “beauty itself,” the individual—the appearance, the likeness—is defined in advance as lacking with respect to its ideal. This is not to say that the contempt that Diotima attributes to the lover is directed at his beloved. When she says that the philosopher comes to “despise” his previous “gaping after a single body,” she is not saying that he despises that body, but that he despises his previous fixation on it. However, this gives an indication of just how ambivalent the lover’s relation to his beloved is; for when the lover comes to rethink his relation to the beloved, what we see develop is a detachment from \textit{(amelon, a lack of care for)} the beloved, on the one hand, and mastery of him on the other.

There is a definite tension in Socrates’ understanding of the aim of philosophical eroticism here. On the one hand, as we have seen, this reorientation of the soul is part of what makes the lover “godlike,” and part of what that means is that the lover begins to assimilate the qualities of the forms. However, one of the most prominent qualities that Socrates ascribes to them—and that he marks as being assimilated by those who see them—is their lack of motion, their impassivity. This impassivity is attenuated in the person who sees the forms, but just as Socrates describes the forms as “whole and unblemished,” “steadfast and blissful,” (\textit{atrems kai eudaimona}), so he describes the initiate who sees them as “whole and unblemished,” “unmoved (\textit{apatheis}) by the evils that awaited us in the days to come” (250c, i.e., unmoved by anything but the forms). Neither the gods nor the souls that follow them (and come to resemble them) become exactly like the forms; for while the forms are completely unmoved the gods are singularly moved by the forms. That is the perfection of the divine procession. Unlike mortals, the gods’ desire is not diverted from its only true object. However, to the extent that they are only moved by the forms, one should understand those who follow the gods as increasingly \textit{unaffected} by world around them. On the other hand, at the start of the myth, when Socrates begins to describe the divine procession, he describes the gods as “ordering all things and caring (\textit{epimeloumenos}) therefore” as they pursue the forms (246e). It is difficult to reconcile the god’s care with the growing indifference (\textit{amelon}) that the pure and godlike lover shows to the world.

We see the same difficulty in the *Symposium*. There the paradigmatic lover, Socrates, also assimilates the impassivity of the forms. Socrates is not only habitually resistant to the effects of cold, hunger, fatigue, alcohol and other physical stimuli (176c, 219e-220b); but his fits of abstraction render him completely impervious to such sensations for hours (175b, 220c). Moreover, along with the rest of the world, in these moments of abstraction the philosopher is also cut off from his beloved. Aristodemus is surprised to find that he has arrived to Agathon’s banquet alone, but once he realizes that he has lost Socrates to one of his solitary meditations, he tells Agathon that there is no use sending anyone after him. “You’d much better leave him to himself. It’s quite a habit of his, you know; off he goes and there he stands, no matter where it is…. I really don’t think you’d better worry him” (175b). Given that Agathon’s slave\textsuperscript{136} was cut off from his beloved. Aristodemus is surprised to find that he has arrived to Agathon’s banquet alone, but once he realizes that he has lost Socrates to one of his solitary meditations, he tells Agathon that there is no use sending anyone after him. “You’d much better leave him to himself. It’s quite a habit of his, you know; off he goes and there he stands, no matter where it is…. I really don’t think you’d better worry him” (175b). Given that Agathon’s slave\textsuperscript{137} pointed out that there are various “sudden revelations” of Socrates (213d, when Alcibiades almost sits at him), which echo the sudden revelation of beauty itself (210e) (xxiii).

\textsuperscript{136} Underscoring Socrates’ resemblance to the form, Nehamas and Woodruff’s “Introduction” to the *Symposium* points out that there are various “sudden revelations” of Socrates (213d, when Alcibiades almost sits at him), which echo the sudden revelation of beauty itself (210e) (xxiii).
called to Socrates with no response and that Alcibiades tells the story of Socrates standing still, lost in contemplation for a whole day, it seems doubtful that they could have done anything to bring Socrates along anyway. Indeed, that seems the point. As Sarah Kofman notes, the fit of abstraction that Socrates falls into on the way to Agathon’s is part of his effort to detach himself from the world around him. While Aristodemus is anxious to have shown up alone, she explains: Socrates, for his part, feels no distress, since detaching himself from shadows is what he trying to do at that very moment in order to ‘recollect’ his soul, to remember it, whereas he runs the risk of forgetting it if he goes on to Agathon’s banquet. When he detaches Aristodemus and sends him on ahead, the act symbolizes the spiritual detachment that Socrates is trying to achieve, the goal of which is to incite the twin to pull away, to cut the umbilical cord, for the greater good of both disciple and master.\footnote{Kofman describes Socrates’ detachment from his beloved in terms of “care” (inciting the twin to “pull away” for the good of both) such detachment also signals a diminishing desire—the philosopher’s \textit{amelon}, his \textit{kataphronesis} (“looking down upon” the object). As Socrates turns his soul towards the forms, the light of that “wondrous vision” overwhelms the value of everything that populates the shadowy world below (\textit{Symp} 210e), including the beloved. This revaluation of everything is what makes detachment from the beloved possible. It is what separates Socrates as a lover from those, like Aristodemus and Apollodorus, who have come to love him and mimic him in speech and dress, but whose desire is absorbed in all the particulars of their beloved so that they fail to move beyond him to the forms.\footnote{While the lover’s effort to foster such detachment in himself and his beloved can be described as “care,” we should be clear about what this involves. It is striking that the philosopher’s “care” seems to be founded on a sort of divine indifference, which it reproduces in the \textit{ethos} of the beloved. Aiming to remove the beloved from the flux of experience, philosophical eroticism breaks the bonds between him and his lover, between him and his senses, between him and his \textit{polis} (and the \textit{doxa} with which it conducts itself). The philosopher seems to aim at making his beloved an autonomous subject, who is capable of resisting the impulses of his senses and of the words of others, but this comes at a cost. The subject is atomized. He is increasingly cut off from those desirable and pleasurable flows of speech and beauty that the \textit{Phaedrus} otherwise shows to be constitutive of him; all so that the subject can be locked into one overriding relationship, to the forms, which orders but also impoverishes its other relationships.}

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\textbf{The Production of the Philosopher}

Refashioning the beloved into an image of their god, the lover makes a philosopher out of him. This involves, above all else, arranging his world around an ideal that is described as existing outside of society, outside of the sensible realm and outside of becoming. In saying that this is the outcome of philosophical eroticism, I fundamentally agree with Marina McCoy’s position that what sets the philosopher apart is his desire for—though not knowledge of—the forms \footnote{Given that Socrates/Diotima comes to look down on the erotic bonds between people as “slavish,” it is particularly apropos that Socrates does not respond to the slave, who tries to reunite him with his company.} (133). This desire is fundamental to the philosopher’s identity. Indeed, I would expand

\footnote{Kofman 14 and Bowery 1, both make this point. However, neither of these authors seem to realize what a difficult position this puts the philosopher’s beloved in. At the same time that the beloved desires to possess and emulate his lover, Socrates demands that, as part of that emulation, the beloved detach himself therefrom. The erotic failures of Aristodemus, Apollodorus, and Alcibiades testify to the difficulty of this demand.}
the scope of this claim. First, given that in the *Phaedrus*’ myth all souls pursue the forms, I would argue that this desire is treated as fundamental to human identity. Of course, only the philosopher regains that original motion, so only he becomes “true,” as it were, to that desire and identity. This is why the philosopher’s *logos* is “purifying,” despite originating from elsewhere and changing the character of his interlocutor; for though the philosopher’s *logos* disrupts the empirical identity of his beloved interlocutor, it does so in order to restore this “original,” lost desire and motion. The other way in which I have tried to push McCoy’s insight is to argue that the reorientation of the soul toward the forms is a much less neutral event than she suggests. McCoy is right that “Plato closely connects moral virtues… to the love of a transcendent good outside of oneself” (6). However, I hope to have shown that the philosopher’s reorientation toward the forms holds profound consequences for how he relates to his beloved, his senses, his body, and his community, and that he seeks to reproduce these relations in his beloved.

By examining his beloved under the glaring light of the forms, the philosophical lover learns to discern lack. He learns to discover the ways in which his beloved falls away from the model, their god, of whom they are both likenesses. Though he seeks to improve his beloved, by making him a likeness of himself and their god, when he discovers his partner’s lack, the lover also learns to free himself of the erotic ties that bind him. The lover learns to detach himself from his beloved and all of beauty’s likenesses, cultivating a certain “divine indifference.” By developing the habit of judging all appearances in the (imagined) brilliance of the forms—that is to say, judging the sensuous in light of the idea, whose incredible value overwhelms the powerful draw of any particular, worldly object—the lover also learns to resist the powerful influxes to which his senses open him. The lover learns to denigrate his body. He learns to view his senses as less real and less worthy of attention than the forms.

In concluding that philosophical eroticism expresses a certain ambivalence or even antagonism, toward the body and the sensible realm as a whole, I claim no great originality. The introduction to Benjamin Jowett’s 19th Century translation of the *Phaedrus* testifies to how enduring this understanding of Plato’s erotics is. “It is unnecessary to enquire whether the love of which Plato speaks is love of men or of women,” Jowett writes, “it is really a general idea which includes both, and in which the sensual element, though not wholly eradicated, is reduced to order and measure.” More recently, Jowett’s position that Plato makes little to no room for the physical indulgence of desire (hence the irrelevance of the beloved’s gender) has been echoed by Daniel Boyarin. Commenting on Diotima’s surprising feminine presence in the *Symposium*, Boyarin suggests that “(t)he relationship between Socrates and Diotima models, as it were, the possibility of a purely spiritual eros between a man and a woman while theorizing that nonsexual eros as procreative in both its same-sex and other-sex (but always no-sex) versions” (2006 13). Boyarin is much more critical of Plato’s denigration of physical eros than Jowett, of course, but both agree that Plato shows a certain “indifference” to gender as a result of his antagonism to the body. The interpretation that Plato fostered an antagonism toward the body also had a definite currency amongst Plato’s ancient readers. Plotinus, for instance, understands Plato’s erotics as beginning with the renunciation of the body.

One certain way to this knowledge [of the Divine] is to separate first, man from the body—you yourself, that is, from the body—next, to put aside that soul which (is) moulded in the body, and… the system of the sense with desires and impulses and

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Every futility, all setting definitely towards the mortal; what is left is the phase of the soul which we have declared the image of the Divine Intellect.\footnote{Plotinus. *The Enneads*. Trans MacKenna, Stephen and B.S. Page (5.3.9). *The Internet Classics Archive*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dec. 2012. Web.} Like Boyarin, Plotinus goes further than Jowett, in suggesting that the physical or sensuous aspect of eros is suppressed entirely. Plotinus’ version of Platonism, which directly echoes the *Phaedrus*’ depiction of the soul as an image of the divine, works to separate the soul from the body and the “system of sense” which integrates it into the world.

Though not in tone, in substance my portrayal of philosophical eroticism as aiming to produce a subject who is “godlike” in his impassivity has something in common with Plotinus’ description of the initiate’s effort to “put aside… the system of the sense with desires and impulses,” which “sets” towards mortal things. And I think my conclusions also resemble Plotinus’ in that I view the ethos that Plato’s erotic discipline fosters as being largely a negative creation. The purified soul is “what is left” (to borrow Plotinus’ formulation). It is “what is left” after philosophical eroticism’s disciplinary effort to strip the soul of the sensual erga and pathe that make it vulnerable to the mortal world. To me, this seems especially disappointing, because philosophical eroticism begins with an open, supple understanding of the soul, which imagines it as dispersed in a flexible and fluid set of relationships. The *Phaedrus*, especially seems to imagine the soul as incredibly plastic and open, inviting experimentation; but the Platonic/Socratic experiment seems based in deprivation.

Finally, the philosophical lover is estranged from his polis. Denigrating all appearances, including the doxa through which the polis deliberates rhetorically, how could the philosophical subject’s pursuit of the forms allow him to remain amidst this community? As the *Phaedrus* suggests, he does not, but “stands aside from the busy doings of mankind,” looking down upon these activities as he draws near the divine (249c). The beloved experiences a similar alienation. As anteros begins to overcome him, he “perceives that all his other friends and kinsmen have nothing to offer in comparison with his friend in whom there dwells a god” (255b). This rejection of the polis is a consistent feature of philosophical eroticism. As the crises of the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* discussed in Chapter One show, Socrates, the philosopher, rejects the doxic deliberations of the polis and the community that is forged in the process of debate.

In short, while I have embraced some rather traditional interpretations of Plato, what I have endeavored to show is that by turning his beloved to the forms the philosophical lover’s discourse attempts to situate him in a characteristic set of relations, which shape what he will become. While it has been increasingly recognized by Plato scholars that philosophical eroticism is meant to be transformative, such scholarship has generally neglected the manner in which this practice constrains what the subject will become. Just as Socrates’ questions limit his interlocutors’ range of answers, thus inculcating in them to certain habits of thought, so philosophical eroticism as a whole sacrifices and impoverishes certain relationships as it elevates and enriches—perhaps, even invents—others. It is time that we squarely face the sacrifices involved in the birth of the philosophical subject.
Bibliography


